

Void 111

Chapter 111 - Cloud Plane [1]

When they arrived back on earth, Damien wasted no time. Their group immediately headed for the Asgard headquarters that stood tall in the middle of Los Angeles.

“The mana density of the atmosphere has dropped intensively,” Rose commented as they were on their way.

Damien couldn’t really feel the difference since the planet itself provided him mana as long as he was present on its surface, but when he actively attempted to tell the difference, he noticed that around 50% of the ambient mana in the world was gone.

‘This must be the work of those old men, so they should be ready to leave.’

While communicating with the world core, he was able to tell that it didn’t really mind the drain of mana that occurred. It could simply produce mana to make up for the difference, even if it took many years to do so.

It was a planet, after all. Time that counted as lifetimes were humans could barely even be regarded as milliseconds to it. Not to mention that the world core had only recently gained sentience.

It had no attachments to the beings who lived on its surface besides Damien. It only thought about its own survival and progression.

Thinking about the world core, Damien remembered something important. ‘Ah! In my rush to feel some more action, I forgot to check if I could bind Apeiron as well!’

He already confirmed that he had a stronger connection to the world than any other planet besides earth, so he wanted to try his hand at gaining power through it.

He even had plenty of free time in the month he spent on the planet. His thoughts were so preoccupied with the future that he’d overlooked such an important task.

‘Well, I haven’t even explored the full benefits of binding earth, so I guess it’s fine. Plus, I can just go back to Apeiron at some point and see what I can do.’

Damien snapped out of his thoughts as the group arrived on the balcony of the Asgard skyscraper. They were greeted by the two old men that still remained.

“Come in,” Xiao Zhen said with a smile. “Let me introduce you to our Cloud Plane before we leave.”

Yin Jian still looked like he held a slight grudge, but it wasn’t anything major. He was aware of the necessity of Damien’s actions, he just didn’t agree with the speed at which he took them. There weren’t any signs of hesitation in his eyes.

But, their plan had already been set in stone long ago. There was no need for any extra talking or negotiation.

When everyone had taken their seats within the meeting room Damien had seen on his first visit, Xiao Zhen began his speech.

“Compared to what I’ve seen on this planet, our Cloud Plane is far more advanced and even our method of cultivation vastly differs.

“For starters, what you call ‘classes’ have different names in our world. 1st class is called the Foundation Establishment realm, where one begins their journey to strength. 2nd class is called the Elemental Comprehension realm, where one feels their uniqueness and decided on the direction of their future path.

“From here, it gets a bit more technical. The realm you call 3rd class is actually two separate realms for us. There are the Core Formation and Core Expansion realms.

“To explain this step, I must explain a few other facets of our world. Our denizens are born with pathways within our bodies called meridian pathways, and we practice cultivation manuals that show us how to circulate mana throughout our bodies.

“The meridians act as gates for mana and aid in the efficiency and potency of our mana output, and the cultivation manuals have varying efficiency as well.

“The lowest grade is Common grade, these are the ones possessed by the common populace who never end up reaching last the Foundation Establishment Realm.

“Next comes Black Grade, then Earth and Sky grade, and finally, Heaven and Divine grade. Each has increasing rarity, with Divine grade meridians signaling heaven-defying geniuses and Divine grade cultivation techniques able to turn someone with common talent into a relatively powerful genius.

“The reason I mention this is because these are important for speaking about the Core Formation and Expansion realms. Although the meridians have the purpose of regulating the flow of mana, they aren’t always enough for the higher levels of power, especially if one doesn’t have a higher grade set of meridians.

“And so, we form cores. The placement depends on the cultivator, but their core is essentially the center of their entire pathway. It helps with regulation, efficiency, potency, and even increases mana capacity.

“During the first 50 levels of what you call 3rd class, we form and develop our cores to fit with the already existing system we have in place, and during the latter half, as the name implies, we expand them.

“And finally, what you call 4th class. This class is split into two realms as well, but they are much more complicated. They are the Law Connection and Law Sea realms. As for the processes of these realms, they don’t need to be described as they are far away from any of us at the moment.

The more Damien listened, the more he realized that the Cloud Plane was a true cultivation world. From meridians to sects to the heavens, all of them were prevalent there. It was as if the concept came from a novel, or maybe the novels were inspired by places like the Cloud Plane.

After talking some more about the realms, Xiao Zhen spoke about the power structure of the world. There were 5 continents, 4 in each cardinal direction, and one in the center.

The strongest power of them all was the Jade Heavenly Palace; which ruled the central continent and even had some say in the other 4 continents, which had their own rulers.

The Jade Heavenly Palace had tens of 4th class beings in the Law Connection realm, and even a few who entered the Law Sea realm. Meanwhile, powers like the Burning Sun Sect that the old men

originated from, which could be considered mid-sized powers, had only a single or a few Law Connection realm experts at best.

3rd classes, on the other hand, were spread far and wide without rarity. The world was objectively tens of times stronger than Apeiron.

There were also various major clans and organizations, and too many sects to name, so Damien cut Xiao Zhen off. After all, learning new things as they came was part of the excitement. He just needed a general overview so he wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb.

"To be honest, our Burning Sun Sect isn't suitable for any of you. You'd already be considered at the level of an elder if you joined us. In my opinion, you should join a power in the Central Continent."

Damien picked up a detail from the tone of his voice. Unlike before, when Xiao Zhen had said only he could join them in the Cloud Plane, he now included the girls as well. It seemed the power he displayed during their last meeting had changed his mind.

"Alright, there's no need for more talking then. We already know the powers on the Central Continent, so we can choose which one to join when the time comes. For now, let's go to the world." Damien said.

And Xiao Zhen agreed. They had already completed their mission on earth, so there was no reason to stay. They only waited an extra few weeks for Damien.

But Damien suddenly thought of something crucial. "How did you guys even get here in the first place?"

He could move through space easily without any help, but that was only because he received Celestial as his 3rd class. It wasn't extremely common for people to have this ability, or it'd be impossible for earth to have remained secluded for so many years without outside forces invading.

Xiao Zhen smiled slightly before walking toward the balcony. "Come, let's go somewhere secluded first."

The group flew to an empty plain well outside of the city before Xiao Zhen made a motion to take something from his spatial ring.

Flash!

In front of their eyes stood a large vehicle that was shaped like a mountainous sword. "This is our flying treasure. The larger ones aren't very common, but they've been handed out by the Jade Heavenly palace to those of us who receive these kinds of missions.

"Although this treasure is only at the Sky grade, it can still take us to our world in the span of a few months."

"Only sky grade?" Damien asked in confusion. Wasn't Sky grade the 3rd highest in their entire system?

"Yes, when it comes to flying treasures that can traverse the boundless space, Sky grade is the minimum. Those Heaven grade and the few Divine grade ones in existence are much faster, have more defenses, and can even kill cultivators and the beasts that reside in the darkness with their specialized artillery."

Damien raised his brow but didn't comment. He knew nothing so it wasn't his place.

Instead, he directly stepped into the massive sword treasure in front of him. It was time to see a new world.

Chapter 112 - Cloud Plane [2]

Endless.

The sea of darkness filled with shining stars that surrounded them was truly endless. It was like looking into a boundless abyss that could swallow everything, yet it was filled with life.

It had been a month since Damien's group had left earth en route to the Cloud Plane, and they were finally able to see how different the observable universe was from the previous notions on earth.

The Milky Way Galaxy itself was no more. Instead, it had merged with the surrounding areas and created a massive starfield. Most of the gas planets that inhabited the galaxy were nowhere to be seen, and even mars had all but disappeared into the void.

When Xiao Zhen was asked about this phenomenon, his reply was simple.

"Not every planet has the ability to adapt to mana."

Those planets that didn't have as much corporeal mass or the ones that couldn't birth intelligent life weren't suitable for a universe introduced to mana.

The world cores of these planets weren't able to grow and facilitate this new energy, which led them to be either banished somewhere else within the infinite void or destroyed without a sound.

Just thinking about these massive celestial bodies disappearing without a trace sent shivers down the spines of everyone present, but they quickly shook it off. They didn't have the power nor the ability to comprehend such large-scale destruction.

Instead, they focused on the new worlds that inhabited the space around earth. As it turns out, many discovered exoplanets were still remaining in the area but hadn't developed as earth had.

There were also countless new worlds radiating life. In the short month that they had been traveling, they had already come across 3 other worlds that were either beginner worlds like earth or middle worlds like the Cloud Plane.

These classifications were also provided by Xiao Zhen. Apparently, they relied on both the mana density and purity and the strength and number of the beings residing in the world.

Higher worlds, which none of them had ever seen, were said to contain tens of demigods and had ambient mana that would feel heavenly to people like them. But Damien didn't necessarily believe this.

The mana purity aside, the fact that there were worlds with such large numbers of unascended demigods didn't sit right with him. Didn't they want to pursue more power? What would drive them to give up that path to stay within their worlds?

Still, he tried his best to take his mind off the hypotheticals.

The flying treasure itself was another marvel for Damien's group. It was similar to a luxury cruise ship, with many built-in facilities. There were halls filled with bedrooms that could contain a few hundred people if they shared 4 to a room, and training and dining halls as well.

There was also a sort of recreational center meant for killing boredom. Although Damien didn't visit it yet, he was slightly curious about what it held. Recreational culture would also differ between worlds.

However, there was one thing he was most excited about. The ship had its own gravitational field, allowing the people on board to use the balconies attached to their rooms and feel as if they were truly standing alone in the vast space.

Why was Damien excited about this? Well, it wasn't simply to sightsee. Rather, it was for training. Damien has known for a while that he could traverse space with his bare body already, and he had been dying to try it.

The only problem now was that the ship was moving leagues faster than he ever could. If he simply left its premises for a few minutes, he'd get stranded. Although he could warp back on board, he had never tried this skill on an object without a fixed position, so he didn't want to risk it.

As he told Rose about this, she reminded him of something crucial.

"Can't you just do that yourself through your vector manipulation?"

Damien smacked his forehead. His excitement had turned him into an idiot for not thinking of such an easy fix.

Putting some thought into it, Damien realized that this was an even better option. If he got to control the gravity field, wouldn't he be able to train as he pleases? Still, vector control drained his mana, so he couldn't use it to form a continuous field as he had no idea how long he would stay training.

It didn't take long for Damien to put his plan into motion. The very next day, he left the protection of the flying sword and sat atop its hull. The gravity here was still present, but it didn't isolate the ship as much as the areas on the balconies.

This was probably due to the fact that the people who designed it didn't mean for there to be people sitting on this area of the ship.

Still, this was the perfect environment for Damien. He hadn't even begun to comprehend what dimensional magic could do, and being in outer space was the best place to do so.

As he entered a meditative state, Damien felt the presence of a larger volume of spatial mana than he'd ever felt before. Well, this was obvious since he was surrounded by the element.

'Is it even an element? This spatial mana seems to be much stronger and more profound than anything that could merely be called an element.'

He opened his eyes and tried to see the swirling ambient mana that always colored his vision, but he wasn't able to do so.

'Is it because the element is colored black like the space around me? Or am I too weak to see it?'

He had the faint feeling it was the latter, but it didn't make sense to him. His eyes had never failed him before this, so they shouldn't do so now.

‘No, being overly reliant on them is stupid.’

Damien shook off his stray thoughts and went back to focusing on his surroundings. The mana around him carried its own ebb and flow, but the space itself was incredibly still.

He wanted to compare the sensation he felt to peeling an onion, but that metaphor didn’t do it justice. There were just too many layers to call it as such.

‘What is space?’

He thought he already had a good grasp of the concept, but this experience was proving him wrong.

‘It’s ever-expanding, but it also constricts upon itself. If it collapsed, then the result would be chaos. Can time even flow without the presence of space?’

Time and space were two interconnected concepts. Without space, where would time flow? Time was sometimes said to be a concept only perceived by the mind, and it was something that was perceived differently by many beings.

Could the difference in the processing speed of the brain contribute to how beings perceive time? Time continued flowing no matter what, it was like an immortal and unbiased river. It listened to no opinion and never slowed down.

What changed was how people used their time, and how much time they had. Damien remembered the murals on the ancient temple in the Eternal Secret Realm. Those demigods on Apeiron lived for at least ten thousand years.

How would they perceive time? The measly 21 years he had been alive would only be a drop in the ocean for them. They might even spend a longer period of time simply sitting in meditation as he was doing now.

‘What would people do if they had the ability to stop or even reverse time?’

Revive the dead? Fix their mistakes? There were plenty of options, but would any of them lead to positive results?

As he figured before, time was an unbiased concept. It was impossible for someone to manipulate it in a single instance solely for their own benefit without affecting anything else. Time was a river, and swimming upstream in that river would inevitably cause massive ripples.

‘But would I still choose to change the past, ignoring these ripples?’

For Damien, the answer was a resounding no. His fall, the bullying he suffered, and even his father’s disappearance were all events that led him to where he was today as the person he was today.

Without those events, he wouldn’t have become strong. Without those events, he wouldn’t have met the people he cared about. He might not even have been able to heal his mother.

But for others? He knew that there were countless people in this ever-expanding universe that would do unspeakable things for the chance to change the past. To turn the wheel of time on a universal scale for such a selfish action was absurd, yet oddly relatable.

‘But what about controlling time within a smaller area? Does this relate back to space?’

The two concepts went hand in hand. They showcased duality and a balance in the universe.

Without space, where would time flow? And without time, how could space expand?

‘Why did I start thinking about time all of a sudden?’

His thought process had skewed so far from the original goal that he almost forgot he was meditating.

However, unbeknownst to Damien, two different translucent types of mana began slightly stirring around his body.

Chapter 113 - Cloud Plane [3]

6 months later.

The massive flying treasure had trekked through tens of star systems and witnessed many amazing sights, varying from desolate worlds that were plagued with death to worlds made entirely of a single element.

Stars like the sun were essentially massive balls of fire, but there were even some worlds that were wholly made of water or even lightning.

Rose and Elena had their horizons broadened by a maddening degree. Both had only seen two worlds in their entire lifetimes, which could already be considered more than any normal person, but now they had been enlightened to the vastness of the universe.

Currently, they were sitting together at a table in the recreational hall of the ship, trying to relieve their boredom in any way they could.

They quarreled often, they trained often, and they even lived lavishly like empresses for a bit, but their journey was too long for them to find any constant sources of entertainment.

By now, the two weren't as opposed to each other as they were when they first met. Even fighting as they used to do could get boring nowadays.

While space travel was fun in concept, it was always a prolonged endeavor. And the loneliness would have quickly become maddening if they didn't have each other to talk to.

"He still hasn't returned yet?" Elena asked with a sigh.

"Nope," Rose responded, "he used to visit every week or so to chat with us, but for the last 4 months, he hadn't left his position."

"Are we sure he didn't get stranded somewhere on the way?"

“How could that be possible? If it really happened, wouldn’t Zara be going crazy right now?” Rose said as she pet the silky fur of the wolf by her side.

“Hmph! I would be fine without him! He is just my best friend, that’s all!” Zara complained defiantly, causing both girls to laugh.

They both knew that she could only talk like this if she felt his presence clearly.

“He hasn’t said anything to me for a while, but I can still feel him in the same place he was last time.”

The girls sighed as they attempted to peer through the ceiling of the ship.

‘I wonder what he’s up to.’

Meanwhile, the person in question sat like an ancient monk training his patience. As the girls said, he hadn’t moved from his spot in many months.

Of the two currents of mana that surrounded his body, one had become a raging torrent while the other had barely changed, in no hurry to make itself known.

Its presence was negligible to the point where even when Damien paused or reentered his meditation; he never felt its existence.

Opening his eyes once more, Damien let out a deep sigh.

‘Dimensional magic is...insane.’

It had been 7 whole months since he immersed himself in his training, but he had barely made progress. Well, that wasn't quite true, but it's how he felt.

On the small scale, he had made immense progress. His existing abilities were further developed and he was able to create the next form of his sword art.

This was the new second form he had been thinking about for a long time. Its main concept was ‘distance’ and now to influence it through space. Its profundity was much higher than his previous iterations, but since it was a single target attack, he placed it as the new 2nd form of his sword art.

Since he was creating the art from scratch, this kind of thing was easy. His art focused on fluidity, but not in a sense where the order of moves mattered. Switching from any step to another step needed fluidity, ignoring any barriers.

The problem was, even with his improvements his dimensional magic skill was stuck at level 1. Even what he would have previously considered as major improvement turned out to not even scratch the surface of this new ability.

Wondering the true extent of his power, Damien slowly stood up from his position. In the distance, he could see a massive planet that was slightly larger than even Apeiron. And judging from the direction of the ship, it was their destination.

They had finally reached the Cloud Plane.

Damien left his spot on the hull of the ship and joined the others inside. It wasn't just the girls, but Xiao Zhen and Yin Jian had also gathered.

"You've finally arrived. I take it your training was a success?"

Damien nodded with a slight smile as he joined the group.

"Now that we're here, I have one more detail I need to confirm," Damien said. "Do we need to use fake names, or will we be fine as is?"

Xiao Zhen pondered for a bit but shook his head in the end. "It should be unnecessary. Although our names tend to bear similarities to the ones you call Chinese in your homeworld, it isn't uncommon for others to exist.

"There are a plethora of cultures in our world, some even sharing similarities with your own. And, since you will be headed for the central continent, you will find a largely mixed population. It's the largest and most advanced of the 5 continents, and it's a place where many cultures converge."

Damien nodded, hiding the slightly disappointed look in his eyes. 'It would have been fun to become Tian Long or Yang Lintian or something.'

Cultivation was one of Damien's favorite genres back in the day, so he held a decent amount of excitement to act as they did in those novels, but he shook away these thoughts.

‘If my name is normal in this world, I can still do all of those things. First on the bucket list, offend a young master. Second on the bucket list, procure a jade beauty!’

As he thought nonsensical things, the flying ship entered the atmosphere of the Cloud Plane.

Surprisingly, the mana density was a bit lower than that of Apeiron, but not by a noticeable amount. Damien could only tell since he was already connected to a world core. This connection made him more sensitive toward ambient mana.

‘This must be due to cultivation. With a large amount of the populace spending prolonged periods simply absorbing ambient mana in place of the usual method for gaining experience, the planet is bound to encounter setbacks.’

Damien glanced at Xiao Zhen. ‘Well, with conditions like this, I can understand the need to usurp mana from other planets. Luckily, this world has a strong divide between the righteous and wicked path, with the righteous sects being in control.’

The righteous and wicked path were terms Damien had learned of not too long ago. While both paths were viable to gain strength, their difference lay mainly in morality.

Wicked path cultivators weren’t averse to committing genocide and mass slaughters for their own gains. They also practiced what was called ‘vile techniques and manuals’. These cultivation manuals would use various means to quickly increase strength, sacrificing foundation in the process.

Some of these manuals even allowed people to steal experience from others, though they were rarely effective. The ones that could do this efficiently would most likely be considered as Divine Grade manuals, but the ones most people used obviously didn’t reach this level.

As such, they needed more victims to proceed in their path to strength, leading to the aforementioned vile acts.

Damien didn't want to imagine what would have happened to earth if wicked path cultivators were more prevalent in this world.

The righteous path could be considered as people with even the slightest bit of morality. Though, Damien didn't believe this. From what he had read and experienced, the righteous path was usually just filled with people who schemed in the shadows rather than in the open.

Well, he didn't want to generalize, as he was aware that there would be plenty of truly righteous people within this classification, while most of them would fall in the grey area like him. He also didn't mind people scheming in the dark. If anything, they'd help him grow his political sense and logical thinking.

At the peak of these people stood the Jade Heavenly Palace. Its name was grandiose enough, but its status was even bigger. If the Jade Heavenly Palace told people to go right, there were very few who would dare to go left.

'Should I aim to join them?'

He definitely considered it, but he had just arrived in the world. It would be stupid to make a decision purely based on hearsay.

While he tried to think logically, the ship finally landed on the ground outside of a massive city. The city itself was surrounded by a large wall, presumably to keep out beasts, and its whole aesthetic screamed flames.

“Welcome to our Burning Sun Sect.” Xiao Zhen said as the door to the flying treasure opened. Smiling lightly as the varied scenes of the area were revealed, he continued.

“And more importantly, welcome to our Cloud Plane.”

Chapter 114 - Central Continent [1]

Damien looked at his surroundings with clear curiosity.

At the moment, Damien’s group was on the western continent where the Burning Sun Sect was located, as this was where Xiao Zhen and Yin Jian were headed. And just from the sight of the city in front of them, Damien could tell how much eastern influence this world contained.

Well, it couldn’t necessarily be called influence since the two worlds were never related, but to him who was raised on earth, the sight of pagodas and eastern style architecture felt that way.

But he felt that something was off.

It wasn’t the scenery itself that was different, rather there was something about the vibe that set the Cloud Plane apart from the other two worlds Damien had been to.

He could feel it in the air he was breathing, it was like this world contained a spirituality that Apeiron didn’t, let alone earth.

Earth was new to mana and the new observable universe, so it didn’t contain this type of uniqueness. As for Apeiron, he hadn’t noticed the difference until he stepped into the Cloud Plane.

He had assumed it was just the increased quality of the ambient mana, but it wasn't just that. Apeiron's atmosphere gave a peaceful yet adventurous feeling that piqued Damien's interest. Meanwhile, the Cloud Plane's atmosphere felt more ruthless and thirsting for strength.

Something about this atmosphere enthralled Damien, making his blood boil. There was no way this entire world was in a constant state of violence, but he felt that the amount of conflict and pressure he could encounter would be leagues ahead of Apeiron.

Currently, Damien's group had already separated from Xiao Zhen, as their cooperation finished when they arrived in the world.

With Yin Jian holding a slight grudge against them and Xiao Zhen having responsibilities within the sect, they most likely wouldn't meet again for a while, if ever.

"So, does anyone have ideas for how we should proceed?" He asked.

"Hmm, judging from what we learned previously, we won't find any challenges on the 4 smaller continents, since we already qualify as elders in these mid-sized sects. It's best if we head straight to the central continent." Rose responded.

"Yeah, I also think we should go straight there. I won't get the chance to improve myself unless I experience some serious pressure." Elena chimed in with a resolute expression.

Out of the three of them, Elena was the one least in her element. Everything that had happened in the past few months was simply surreal to her.

Only during their extended trip to reach the Cloud Plane did reality finally sink in.

First, she met Damien again. When it comes to him, she always tended to subconsciously avoid any issues. She had built a strong determination to meet him again that almost bordered on insanity, and driving this determination was her feelings for him.

But when they met, he brought back a woman of his own. She was crushed but did her best to put up a strong front. She started avoiding her strong emotions for him as they slowly settled back into the relationship they used to have.

Yet, things weren't the same. Damien wasn't the same kid he was back then. He was always focused on something else, rarely ever having fun like he used to, and his entire personality seemed to shift towards something more indifferent.

She missed the old Damien, but she didn't say anything about it. Did she even have the right to? She had no idea what he had experienced in the 4 years they had been apart, but she knew it was extreme.

And so, she once again evaded the issue. She continued to live life like they did until the Niflheim infiltration. At that point, she felt both excitement and terror.

She thoroughly enjoyed the new feeling that came with entering danger with allies, but she also got the chance to realize the vastness and cruelty of the universe.

The scenes she saw that day still haunted her dreams sometimes, but she still ignored them.

And after that, she traveled to a new world, saw its sights, was given a new sword, and even dined with a being whose strength seemed unfathomable.

Throughout every ordeal, she just went with the flow. She decided not to think too deeply about things since she felt her brain would overheat if she tried.

That is until she ended up on a spaceship to another world. She was given 7 months to herself, where her only company was Rose and Zara.

During those 7 months, everything came crashing down on her. The reality she tried her hardest to evade finally caught up to her. As she looked out the massive windows of the ship and saw the glimmer of stars that surrounded it, she realized that in a simple 2 months, her life had flipped upside down.

She wasn't okay with the fact that Damien was with someone that wasn't her, but could she complain? Frankly, she liked Rose too, even if it was just as a friend, she finally got to experience what it was like to have a rival.

Sometimes, she would wish that Rose was more arrogant and hateful so she could justify her intrusive thoughts, but she forcefully suppressed that emotion. She didn't want to become some stereotypical envious girl.

She tried her hardest to revert to just being Damien's friend, to be someone he could rely on, but was it ever a simple task to do so? Her crush on him had sprouted when they were still children. One could imagine how much those feelings evolved when she harbored them for 10 years.

She was also made painstakingly aware of her own weakness. Even though Damien and Rose never said anything about it, even including her when they could, their subtle actions made her understand the gap.

The fact that they almost didn't allow her to come with them on this adventure was testament to this. She was weak, and still in 2nd class while they were in 3rd.

She saw their power when they fought the dark imps of Niflheim, and she also saw how unhesitant Damien was to kill. She knew that her current mindset wouldn't cut it in the future.

She had only recently learned about mana circuits, and in a bid for strength, had created her own during the trip to the Cloud Plane.

While Elena was happy, she also hated her situation. And when she thought of how she could change it...

'Strength.'

This was the only thing that came to mind. If she was stronger, she could walk side by side with her friends, and if she was stronger, she could make her own decisions and be respected. Even if it was out of concern for her safety, Elena hated being patronized.

And so, she made it her goal to both catch up and surpass at least Rose on this trip to the Cloud Plane. She was aware that they'd be separating from Damien later, but she wasn't worried. All this meant was that she had to grow enough to impress him when they reunited.

And then maybe...

She shook off the thought, thinking it nonsensical. In the end, nothing else mattered until she could contend with the others.

Elena was firm in her resolve. Unlike their 4 years when she gained strength for Damien's sake, or to make sure she wouldn't end up in a similar situation again, this time she was doing it for herself.

Sure, she wanted to be recognized, and sure she wanted to be praised, but this was all secondary. She wanted strength so she could achieve what she wanted when she wanted.

It wasn't a grand goal, but it was a resolute one. It was a goal that she could follow until she reached the apex. And now that she finally had a direction, all that was left was to implement it.

"Elena, you there?"

Elena was snapped out of her thoughts by a large hand that was continuously patting her face.

"I'm here, I'm here! Stop being a weirdo!" She said as she slapped it away. The hand was naturally Damien's.

"Ah, sorry you were just spacing out for a while. It looks like we've finally reached the sea."

Only then did Elena notice her surroundings. While she was in thought, their previous conversation had already ended. They made their way to the edge of the western continent to reach the sea before flying, but Elena was only following them subconsciously.

Now that she was woken from her thoughts, she was finally able to appreciate her surroundings.

The rolling waves of the massive body of water brushed against the sandy shore of the continent. This was the Cloud Sea of the Cloud Plane. The body of water took up much more of the world than the continents, so it was named after the world itself.

Crossing this vast sea, the group would reach the central continent, where their journey would begin. Watching the calming scene in front of her, Elena only had a single thought.

‘I will surpass everything.’

Chapter 115 - Central Continent [2]

The Cloud Sea was expansive to the point where many cultivators didn’t have the ability to cross the whole thing, leaving them stuck on their own continents.

In the first place, the 4 peripheral continents of the Cloud Plane were vast enough to where there wouldn’t be a need to leave them if one didn’t aspire to, so there weren’t many that tried.

But of those who tried, very few were able to succeed. Besides the distance that could diminish the mana pool of anyone attempting to cross the whole thing in one go, there were also the dangers of the sea itself.

It wasn’t just earth where sea monsters ran rampant, if anything earth was a beginner example of this. For worlds as old as the Cloud Plane, the sea was bound to be even more terrifying.

However, there were ships that people used to ferry to the different continents, but they were extremely rare and meant for only those in the upper class of society.

Luckily, the sea monsters that resided near the surface were usually at the peak of 3rd class at their strongest, so such a service was possible. But the risk of a much stronger sea monster rising from the depths was always present. Nobody could guarantee absolute safety within the Cloud Sea.

Currently, Damien's group was experiencing these dangers firsthand. Zara was flying at a high altitude, causing the sea monsters to be unable to reach them, but it didn't stop them from trying.

They would often see massive beasts, some resembling animals of earth while some were completely mythological, jumping towards them, trying to swallow them whole.

The sight was frankly amazing to watch. Especially since almost everyone in the group could combat these monsters alone, they took the experience as a show.

But they didn't drop their guard. Xiao Zhen had warned them about the Cloud Sea and the monsters residing within it, pointing out one beast in particular.

"If you ever see a storm charging towards you, always run in the opposite direction." He had said. "That is no natural storm, it is one of the massive sea dragons that will occasionally surface to hunt prey."

The sea dragons were described more like huge snakes larger than most buildings, but they still fell into the category of eastern dragons.

And while they were told to avoid them at all costs, Damien was anticipating the encounter, if it ever came. He had met a wyvern at the beginning of his journey, but he hadn't met anything that could be confidently called a dragon.

And a dragon was something he desperately wanted to meet, and potentially devour.

Not even mentioning his skill, Damien hadn't evolved his body in a very long time. There simply weren't any suitable beasts to do so. Besides, at the level they had reached now, beasts were intelligent lifeforms who wouldn't wantonly seek conflict.

'Well, if it's conflict I want, I should be able to find plenty in the central continent.'

The central continent's major forces were mainly split into the 5 sects and 4 major clans.

These sects were the Azure Lotus Sect, the Divine Dragon Temple, the Supreme Fairy Paradise, the Celestial Star Palace, and finally, and the Jade Heavenly Palace.

The 4 major clans of the Central Continent were the Wang, Shi, Xue, and Long clans.

Unlike the 4 major clans, which were relatively equal in strength, the sects had a ranking for themselves that followed the aforementioned order from last to first.

They were based on the number and strength of disciples and the sects' placement in both the secret realm and regional tournament events.

Sadly, the regional tournament was still 5 years away, so Damien most likely wouldn't get to compete in it, but he wasn't aware of the date when the secret realm opened.

He already had experience in a secret realm, so he was excited at the prospect of entering another one.

There were tens of smaller sects within the continent as well, but they were rarely mentioned, as their disciples came mainly from those who failed to get accepted into the top 5 sects.

Besides them, there was also an alchemy guild, whose influence spanned all 5 continents, as well as other auxiliary forces. However, these forces didn't strictly require loyalty, as one could join them even while being in a sect.

Damien had also heard about a Mercenary Guild that functioned similar to the adventurers guild on Apeiron, but its influence wasn't near as large. It was counted among those previously mentioned auxiliary powers.

Suddenly, Damien opened his inventory and took out a small piece of crystal that Xiao Zhen gave him.

‘Who would’ve thought that spirit stones actually exist.’

The currency of this cultivation world was actually spirit stones, however, they weren't exactly as they had been written in the countless cultivation novels he had read.

They were made of crystallized mana, but they weren't rare in the slightest. It seems this world produced them from the very start when it was introduced to mana.

Spirit stones couldn't be used to raise cultivation or mana capacity though, as the mana inside of them wasn't pure at all. It was contaminated with various other forms of energy that resulted in the clear crystals that became known as spirit stones.

Even without explanation, Damien was able to figure this out. After all, he had personally crystallized pure mana and seen its appearance and ability. Those mana beads he made worked like compressed bombs rather than harmless currency.

As Damien slowly took his attention away from the spirit stone in his hand, he noticed the shadow of land in the distance. While they weren't exactly close, they weren't far at all.

Truthfully, he thought they'd be in for another month of traveling, but Zara's speed made the trip much more convenient. It had only been a week, but he projected that they'd reach their destination in another day's time.

However, it was as if the heavens didn't want them to have a smooth journey. How could they cross the Cloud Sea peacefully when everyone else was forced to struggle?

From the distance, a massive storm approached them. It looked like a hurricane, with swirling winds whose speed reached the level where they could shred any weaker being, raging lightning that evaporated the seawater it touched, and roaring waves whose height reached the level of tsunamis.

It was a true natural disaster, yet there was nothing natural about it. In the middle of that storm, Damien could make out a massive shadow that silently swam through the air.

"The Cloud Sea's famous sea dragon, huh. They have the innate ability to control the weather, and their affinity lies in water and lightning. If one meets a sea dragon on their voyage, their only option is to pray for a quick death."

Elena and Rose looked at the incoming storm in trepidation. Although they had some confidence that they could win the battle if they worked together, it didn't suppress the innate fear they felt as they watched the scene in front of them.

"Damien, it might be best if we speed up our journey so we don't encounter that thing. It looks like it'll be too close of a shave for us."

However, Damien's thoughts didn't align with this notion in the slightest. He suddenly felt a thirst that he hadn't felt in a while, maybe even since his days within the dungeon.

His eyes began to change, with the blood-red color overtaking the amethyst that it usually calmly interacted with. His teeth elongated into fangs, and his fingers did the same into claws.

His muscles tensed, and his throat felt hot. He felt the undeniable urge to roar into the heavens. His blood boiled as if there was something within him that refused to retreat from this encounter.

And there was. The traits he had gained from the wyvern felt challenged by this beast that was also descended from dragons. It felt the need to establish dominance over the sea dragon.

Damien's aura began to shift, its color mimicking the blood red of his eyes, as his bloodlust leaked, grabbing the attention of the sea dragon.

Sensing its gaze, Damien's excitement grew as a certain feeling pricked at his intuition.

It was a sense he had long forgotten due to its inactivity over the past few years.

It was the sense that told him when he would benefit from devouring his prey.

‘That power, I want it.’

Chapter 116 - Central Continent [3]

Boom!

It wasn't the sound of an explosion or impact, but the sound of the shockwave released when Damien catapulted himself towards the raging storm in the distance.

He could no longer wait for the upcoming combat.

Sensing the bloodthirsty aura approaching it, the sea dragon roared in fury.

“Human! You dare challenge me within my own domain?!”

Damien responded with a wild grin as he reached the outer edge of the storm, thrusting himself into it without an ounce of hesitation.

The entire sequence of events took place in mere seconds, leaving the girls stunned without the ability to react.

“Hey, big guy, why don't you give me a good fight!” Damien yelled.

“Hmph! I’ll show you what happens to those who dare challenge my authority!”

The sea raged as the waves transformed into massive tornadoes that wildly moved through the storm. The lightning that had been randomly striking the sea began concentrating on Damien’s location.

Boom! Boom!

Everywhere he went, he was greeted with another lightning bolt, but Damien didn’t seem to care. His entire being radiated that blood-red color that craved destruction.

Black lightning began crackling around his body. Unlike his previous lightning, this new iteration seemed much more threatening and wild.

He didn’t even try to aim, randomly discharging the lightning into the space around him to counter any attack thrown his way. At this point, he still hadn’t seen the sea dragon’s true appearance, only the faint shadow that presented itself within the storm.

As Damien dodged another lightning bolt, a tornado of swirling water charged in his direction, enveloping him within it.

Within the tornado, Damien was subjected to countless blades of water that barraged him from every side. It was clear that the dragon’s strength was above his, as the damage it could do to him was quite severe.

Cuts began accumulating on his body, but Damien laughed it off. He could feel his body regenerating, albeit slightly slower than the rate of injury.

Realizing that if he simply charged out of the tornado he'd get shredded, Damien summoned his sword before taking his stance.

He widened his legs and bent his knees slightly, crouching in mid-air while his arm holding the sword pulled back, keeping the sword angled perfectly horizontal.

‘Void Sword Art Second Step: Horizon Break’

Boom!

Damien's sword flickered as he thrust his arm forward, causing a massive hole to be punched into the tornado. Damien rushed out of this opening, smiling at the potential of his new attack.

However, he wasn't given a moment of rest. The second he left the tornado, he was barraged by a series of lightning bolts, as if the heavens wanted to smite him.

Boooom!

He avoided as many as he could, but some still hit their mark. Damien was flung back and his shirt was torn open, revealing the massive burn mark that had appeared on his chest.

Still, Damien was grinning from ear to ear. He wasn't a masochist by any definition of the word, but he was finally in a fight that he wouldn't automatically win.

Deciding that he had enough fun with the storm, Damien charged for the sea dragon. He abused his teleportation, spazzing from one area to another with seemingly no pattern.

“Human! Stop running and die for me!”

The sea dragon was losing its temper, but before it could do anything, it felt imminent danger. It quickly twisted its massive body at an impossible angle, watching a large gash be torn in the haze where it had been residing.

‘Void Sword Art First Step: Bladeless’

Now that he had reached a new level of destructiveness, especially after his training in outer space, the possibilities for bladeless were immense. Yet, Damien used its most primal form, putting large amounts of mana into the strike to enlarge its target radius.

With the haze removed, he finally got a good look at the sea dragon. Well, serpent was a better word to describe it. It was larger than even Zara, with its length being around 100 meters, and its entire body was covered in shining green scales.

It had no limbs, and its resemblance to dragons resided in its head. It looked like a knockoff version of a Chinese dragon, just massive and terrifying.

“You dare?!” It spoke once again. Not once had it met someone who could make it past the storm.

But it wasn't weak without the storm. On the contrary, its abilities hadn't even been showcased yet.

Now that he had a clear picture of his opponent, Damien went straight for its head. He wanted to slice it off in one go, but that was never an option.

The sea dragon whipped its tail, causing a loud clap as the air around it was pushed in on itself. Instead of teleporting away like he logically should, Damien met the tail head-on.

He charged mana into his fist as quickly as he could, sending his mana circuits into overdrive as he punched out.

When the two came in contact, another explosion resounded through the area. The tail was pushed back, cracks evident in its scales, while Damien was flung much further.

His arm was dangling by his side, seemingly not functional anymore. His bones had been shattered in the collision, almost to the point of no recovery, but Damien was able to offset some of the damage at the last second.

The sea dragon was surprised that the human in front of it had survived that collision, but it shook off its thoughts. It was already getting bored of this battle, so it wanted to end it as soon as possible.

“Human, let me show you what it means to face a dragon!”

The sea dragon opened its mouth, gathering mana within it. A massive cerulean blue ball of water mana began forming within its jaws.

‘It’s going to use a breath attack.’ Damien thought. ‘Then, let’s compare that as well.’

He hadn’t used his breath in a very long time, and he hadn’t seen its capability after the change in his affinities, so he was anticipating the next clash.

Just like the dragon, Damien began inhaling a massive breath. A translucent, highly destructive mana gathered within his jaws as black streaks crackled along its surface.

The two remained stationary, staring at each other with ferocious eyes as their attacks charged. Maybe it was out of respect, challenge, or because neither could be bothered, but they didn’t interrupt each other in the slightest. And then...

Two resounding roars shook the Cloud Sea. A beam of striking blue energy that looked eerily similar to a laser and a beam of translucent energy crackling with black light collided with each other.

BOOOOM!

An explosion like no other was produced at their collision, but neither seemed willing to back down. They continued pushing at each other, attempting to overpower the other before their energy diminished.

The sheer heat generated by the collision was enough to damage both of them. The scales on the sea dragon’s neck began to melt, while Damien’s skin also started to blister. If one looked closely, one would be able to see the red muscles underneath.

But he wasn't even close to done. Even while the collision of the energy beams was ongoing, Damien teleported onto the dragon's head. Finding a crack in the scales, he thrust his sword down.

'Void Sword Art 4th Step: Spatial Collapse'

He initiated spatial collapse within the dragon's skin. Instead of the atmosphere twisting, it was the dragon's body itself.

"ROOOAAARR!"

The dragon released a roar of agony at this feeling. It couldn't allow this human to continue, or it might truly die.

The sky began to rumble as thunderclouds formed above the two. Without suspense, tens of lightning bolts began raining down.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Unlike before, Damien didn't even try to dodge. He stood firm on the dragon's head, pouring more mana into the spatial collapse as the lightning impacted his body.

His head felt fuzzy, his skin was burned off, and even his muscles began to melt due to the heat. Yet, he stood strong.

If he didn't have innate lightning resistance because of his own affinity, he'd have been reduced to ashes already. But that was only a hypothetical scenario.

“AAARRRGH!”

Damien roared in pain, but he didn't budge. Grasping his sword with both hands, he twisted it within the wound, causing it to expand.

Not wanting to stay stationary and be bombarded, he used all his strength, even using some mana to enhance himself, and dragged his sword through the dragon's body, carving a massive gash into its flesh.

When he met with scales, he used sheer power and heat to blaze through them. He ignored everything else, only wanting to kill this damn beast.

His body tried its best to regenerate, but it was piling damage too fast for it to work effectively. For the first time since the dungeon, Damien began accumulating scars.

Pressurized jets of water shot towards him, drilling holes into his already breaking body, but he didn't care. He twisted his blade once more, deepening the wound he was causing.

The dragon no longer had the ability to roar. Its internal organs had already been ruptured by the spatial collapse, and with the positioning of the sword, its brain was next. If it didn't do anything, it'd die here.

The storm's ferocity increased, leaving Damien's regeneration insignificant. Both opponents were fighting death.

Damien's eyes were filled with a light of madness. Something was driving him to these insane lengths, but he was none the wiser. He felt the pain and he felt the threat of death, but it only made his blood boil with excitement.

The battle seemed at a standstill, with both opponents knocking on death's door, but Damien still had a card up his sleeve. A bright flame enveloped his blade, its heat melting even the air around it. With this final push, Damien cut through the dragon's skull like butter.

Crack!

One final sound resounded in the area before everything went quiet. In the deafening silence that followed, only a single word could be heard.

“Devour.”

Chapter 117 - Central Continent [4]

The transition from the intense life-or-death battle to the point when everything ended was so drastic that the girls couldn't make heads or tails out of the whole situation.

They only knew the intense fear they had felt from seeing Damien's condition. Even if it had been a while, Damien was still accustomed to the perilous situation that he had just gone through, so from his perspective, it was just an entertaining fight.

To the girls who had only ever seen him dominate his opponents, though, the shock factor was intense. Realistically, he had almost died in that fight.

His skin was torn off, his muscles were melting, and his regeneration ceased to function, but he took all the pain with a grin on his face. It was truly harrowing.

‘What does someone have to experience to shoulder that kind of pain with a smile?’

The same thought was running through both Rose and Elena’s minds. Rose especially was told the story of what happened to him in the dungeon, but hearing about it and seeing first hand was different.

He was bestial and insane during the fight. His aura and entire personality had gone through an immense change. He was like a different person, a person none of them had seen before.

The only one relatively unaffected by the situation was Zara. Since she had been with him during many of the intense fights he went through in the dungeon, this wasn’t anything new to her.

She had also seen him at his worst when his humanity had all but escaped him, so she saw this behavior as normal.

Her emotional intelligence hadn’t reached a level where she could tell that this change was concerning.

Damien had been slowly improving. Either that, or he had successfully suppressed his insanity after prolonged periods of human contact. But it wasn’t something he could simply get rid of.

Especially when he finally met an opponent that could challenge him and a beast that could grant him another trait, he lost himself.

Even now, after the battle had ended, he stood atop the sea dragon's corpse with the same light in his eyes. The light of mania. His muscles and skin were already healing, but they didn't look as pristine as they once did.

Due to the fact that his regeneration had failed, the scars and burns of the battle stayed with him. Albeit they weren't grotesque and were instead faded as if they were years old, they were still present.

It was then that the girls heard Damien speak. In his voice which was still hoarse due to his vocal cords being slightly fried, he said that single word.

“Devour.”

An abyssal black fog materialized around him, wrapping around the sea dragon's head before expanding and covering its entire body. Slowly but surely, the corpse began to vaporize into motes of energy.

As the energy entered his body, Damien once again went through a change. His organs, which had already been refined, were broken down and restructured to be more suitable for combat.

A strong outer defense wasn't enough to get by. Even if the damage of an attack was negated, the force of its impact could still rattle the internals and kill a cultivator easily.

Along with the hardening of his organs, the other areas of his body began to change as well. Unlike his previous evolutions that were mostly centered around one area to house the new trait he gained, this one was different. The storm trait of the sea dragon wasn't something that was concentrated on a single area of the body.

But something interesting started to occur in his blood. Damien's beast bloodline was something he gained through his first mutation, and due to this it wasn't complete and evolved into something new every time he devoured a suitable beast.

The last time it experienced this kind of evolution was when he devoured the wyvern on the 40th floor and being the most powerful beast he evolved from until that point, its bloodline took priority.

And now, Damien had devoured another subspecies of dragons. When the two bloodlines came into contact with each other, they immediately reacted negatively, seemingly fighting each other for dominance.

Damien's blood literally boiled at the collision between the two prideful sources, causing his body to jerk and stiffen from pain. It wasn't an external impact this time, but his own body fighting itself.

His veins bulged as he clenched his teeth, grinding them together hard enough to produce an audible sound. His body began to spasm as his blood burned. However, this collision wasn't allowed to continue for long.

In some unknown location within him, Damien's Void Physique became active, sending its essence into his bloodstream. The second this essence met the two opposing bloodlines, they instantly calmed down.

The effect was magical. The adverse reaction he was having stopped abruptly as his two dragon bloodlines began to calmly fuse under the guidance of this new essence.

His eyes widened as his usual cross-shaped pupils continuously alternated to a more vertical and reptilian shape.

Two bumps formed in Damien's skull, causing protrusions in his forehead that his skin couldn't contain. It quickly burst, letting two blade-like horns erupt. However, they were quickly evaporated into essence and returned to his body.

The same happened with his skin. It hardened and separated into shining ink-colored scales before returning to normal. Now that his beast bloodline had tipped towards becoming a wholly dragon bloodline, the physical traits threatened to show themselves.

Yet, his Void Physique continued to disallow it. Any external changes to his body were destroyed and turned into energy to supplement the strengthening of his physical body.

As the evolution process came to an end, any liquid within his body began to churn. Logically, this should have caused more pain, but that didn't occur in the slightest.

Instead, the churning seemingly empowered him. It felt similar to the sensation of extreme anticipation, making Damien want to roar into the heavens.

And so, he did.

The seas raged and storm clouds gathered in his vicinity. Thick black streaks of lightning danced through the air. Whirlpools formed in the water below him and the waves once again peaked.

No sea monster dared to go near the area. Even the ones who had planned to investigate after sensing the disappearance of the sea dragon's aura hesitated.

The storm was much smaller than the previous one, but its intensity didn't lose out in the slightest. But after only 10 brief minutes, the entire thing subsided.

Damien slowly opened his eyes feeling refreshed. He hadn't felt such excitement in a very long time, not even during his time infiltrating Niflheim. These kinds of head-on collisions were his favorite.

With his battle finished, Damien flew back to the area where the girls were watching, not even aware of his changed state during battle. The blood-red aura had receded, and his eyes had returned to their usual yin-yang pattern of red and amethyst.

He interpreted the extreme urge to kill that he had experienced as the thirst for battle he hadn't felt in so long, subconsciously avoiding the subject.

Reaching the girls, Damien let out a light smile. "Let's get to dry land now, shall we?"

Rose and Elena had a mountain of questions they wanted to ask, but seeing that he was stable again, they didn't want to push it.

'I have no idea what triggered that state, and I don't want to bring it up and induce such a thing again.' Rose thought.

She knew there was a problem, but she had no idea how to fix it. It was something that they'd need to talk about at another time, but that wasn't now.

Meanwhile, Zara was simply excited. “That was awesome! Watch, I’ll be able to do something cool like that, too!”

Damien smiled as he patted her soft fur. “I’m sure you will.”

Even after so long, he had no idea what her bloodline was, and this spoke volumes. An unknown yet powerful bloodline would surely grant her an overpowered trait. And the fact that she hadn’t received one yet was testament to this fact.

The group flew in relative peace for the next day, everyone in their own thoughts as they reached their destination and set foot on dry land once more.

‘Finally, the Central Continent.’

Chapter 118 - Separation [1]

Unlike the sandy beaches of the Western Continent, the Central continent bordered the Cloud Sea with massive overarching cliffs. The waves of the sea crashed against these cliffs and created spiraling patterns on its surface.

Landing on flat land, Damien and the girls took a moment to appreciate the air they were now surrounded with. It was odd that there wasn’t a gradient that led to the change in atmosphere, but they didn’t focus on this point.

Instead, they focused on the cleanliness and elevating feeling the mana contained. It still contained that underlying message that the entire Cloud Plane followed, but its vibe was much loftier.

“It’s crazy to see how different the feeling of mana is in different places,” Elena commented.

Rose nodded. “Yeah, it’s more obvious here since there are multiple continents unlike Apeiron, but it really makes you wonder if mana is just a random energy that simply exists.”

“Are you trying to say that mana might contain some sentience?” Damien asked, intrigued by the concept.

“Hmm, I’m not sure exactly, but doesn’t the records have at least a basic level of sentience to accurately manage every being in existence and cater to their individuality?”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Still, I don’t think any of us are qualified to ask such questions. There’s that old saying about the truth being too dangerous for a reason.”

The other two nodded in agreement. Sometimes, knowing things could hurt more than it helped. It could deflate one’s confidence and drive, and also drive them into despair depending on the truth they learned.

“Well, let’s not focus on such an ethereal concept at the moment. We need to figure out the direction we want to take from here.”

At the mention of the future, Rose’s expression became slightly pained. Although she was supportive of Damien, it didn’t mean she didn’t want to stay with him. She had much more fun adventuring together with him than when she was alone.

Turning to Elena, she smiled lightly. “Hmph, since you’re going off on your own, I’ll just have to settle with little Elena over here.”

“Who are you calling little?” Elena challenged as she puffed out her chest. She was slightly taller than Rose, so with this move, she was able to slightly look down on her.

“Just because you’re taller doesn’t mean I can’t call you little!” Rose responded with her gaze focused on a certain area.

“Hey!”

As the two squabbled, Damien ended up looking in the other direction. Why did they have to bring up that kind of thing around him? If he inserted himself into the conversation, he would probably be labeled a pervert, but he felt that interrupting them would make him a buzz kill.

‘Sigh, we probably should’ve asked for a map or something before we left the western continent.’

They were in too much of a hurry to leave that they had disregarded some small conveniences like directions.

‘Well, I guess I’ll just let fate lead me or something.’

Damien already had a goal in mind once he heard about the power structure of the central continent. Rather than the Jade Heavenly Palace, he was more interested in the Celestial Star Palace. After all, just from its name alone, he felt it was more suited to him.

“Are you guys planning to join a sect?” He suddenly asked, curious about the girls’ decision.

Elena was the one to speak up first. “Mhm, we talked about it and decided we will head to the Supreme Fairy Paradise.”

“That’s right,” Rose continued, “the sect only accepts females, so we won’t have to worry about any annoying young master tropes that’ll cause us more trouble in the long run.”

Damien raised his brow. It turns out Rose had graduated from strictly watching anime and had read some novels in her time on earth as well.

“You should still be careful, though. Even if you can evade the young masters, you’ll still be subject to plenty of jealousy with your talents. Both of you need to stay cautious even within the sect.”

“Yeah, don’t worry. We can take care of ourselves, I thought we already proved that.”

Damien smiled wryly. Even if he knew their strength, he was allowed to worry, right? Still, he was glad they had confidence in themselves.

“If this world is anything like what we’ve read, arrogance is a good quality to have as long as we don’t try to challenge the heavens as ants. Keep your heads high and bow to nobody unless they have earned your respect.”

There was definitely something mysterious about earth. If it was just some fantasy novels, he could accept the coincidence, but the various genres and various theologies around the world were resemblant to real worlds that existed in the observable universe.

But earth wasn't in contact with mana before a decade ago, so it should've been impossible for this to occur. But from Damien's experience in Apeiron, the fiction on earth was generally accurate in its tellings of other worlds, at least when it came to power structure.

But even as someone who bound the earth's world core, he didn't have the answers.

'Whatever, it's not important right now.'

Looking at the girls, Damien felt slightly unwilling to part. He was surprised by his own feelings, but he disregarded them. He wouldn't go back on his decisions now, and he didn't want the girls to forgo the plans they had made just because he changed his mind.

"Just be careful out there," Damien said lightly.

Rose smiled at his change in demeanor. 'This big idiot really hates being honest with himself.'

Disregarding Elena who was standing next to her, Rose embraced Damien tightly and stole a kiss. Unlike the chaste kisses they'd shared before, Rose made sure she got some tongue this time.

Damien's eyes were wide as they darted between Rose and Elena, but in the end, he just closed them and enjoyed the kiss. He wouldn't see her for a while, so he would relish this small moment they could share.

After a full minute, Rose decided it was enough and pulled back with a slightly red face. "If you forget about me before we meet again, I'll make sure to beat you up until you remember again."

Elena had been looking in the other direction, obviously not interested in watching their show of affection, but when she heard Rose talk again, she turned back around and took her chance to say farewells as well.

Unlike Rose, she simply gave Damien a tight hug. Well, the hug wasn't too simple with how tight she was squeezing him.

Damien was trying his best to ignore the feeling of her chest pressing into his when he heard her mouse-like voice. His hearing had advanced to the point where he could hear her clearly, even if Rose couldn't.

"We aren't the only ones who need to be safe, dummy. Don't do dangerous things as you did with the sea dragon. I don't want to lose you again."

Damien smiled lightly and replied in a voice only she could hear. "I'm glad you feel that way and don't worry. I won't put you through that again."

They hadn't really talked about their feelings when he initially fell, and he didn't know whether to be happy or sad that she had been affected so deeply. He was glad she cared for him that much, but he felt that he burdened her for the 4 years it took him to return.

He really owed her a lot more than he let on, but he realized he had been neglecting her for a while. There was a reason for this, he just didn't want to admit it.

He didn't know how to feel about her. He liked her before his fall, and his feelings for her increased after the legacy tomb trial, but he felt that those increased feelings were fake.

Regardless of how accurate the representation was, that wasn't the real Elena. He didn't want his feelings for her to be based on an illusion.

So, he had been subconsciously avoiding her to somehow rid himself of those false feelings. He didn't know how he'd treat her when everything was over, but he persisted.

Still, he didn't admit this. He just comforted her slightly before they broke off their hug. With the farewells finished, the group slowly split up.

Damien watched as Elena and Rose's figures faded into the distance with a slightly forlorn gaze before turning to Zara.

"I guess it's just us again." He said.

"Mhm!" Zara responded. "Let's go, let's go!"

She was also saddened by the separation, but she was excited to spend more time with Damien. Even if she really liked the girls, she still missed the days when it was just them.

Smiling at her excitement, Damien climbed on Zara's back. 'Maybe I haven't been giving her enough attention recently.'

"Then let's go. We have a whole new world awaiting us."

Chapter 119 - Separation [2]

For the next 2 days, Damien and Zara simply flew through the blue skies of the central continent as they looked out for any large cities near them.

Well, it wasn't too hard like it was in Apeiron. They managed to find a port city only a few tens of kilometers away from their starting location, but it wasn't what they were looking for.

Instead, Damien just took a quick stop there and used the meager amount of spirit stones he had acquired from Xiao Zhen to buy a map. He learned how expensive life in this world would be.

'I'm going to have to figure out some way to make money here.'

He had used all 10 of his spirit stones on a map that wasn't even detailed. However, it was enough for him. He only needed to know the location of the Celestial Star Palace, which, as the 2nd rank sect in the entire continent, was clearly outlined on the map.

But that wouldn't suffice for his entire stay in this world. He had no plans for leaving anytime soon, so he needed a way to make money and sustain himself.

'It's going to be a pain in the ass.'

For now, he chose to ignore it and turned his focus back to the map in his hand.

With no surprise, the sect was located near the center of the continent where the mana density was thickest. Although the Jade Heavenly Palace had the privilege of taking the exact center, the Celestial Star Palace wasn't too far from it.

In fact, both sects had a long-standing relationship as rivals. The Jade Heavenly Palace had a firm hold on its title as the top-ranked sect, but the Celestial Star Palace always stayed directly behind it, waiting for an opportunity to overtake it.

Their rivalry wasn't something Damien knew the full extent of, but for them to be located within such a close range to each other, it had to run deep.

Being new, Damien also didn't know the scale of the map, which correlated to the size of the entire central continent. He just assumed its size based on what he could see.

But in the following days, the world proved him wrong. In fact, the central continent was many times larger than he could have ever expected. Currently, he had spent an entire week traveling, and even at Zara's speeds, he was just beginning to see the outline of the central region in front of him.

Thinking about it, this half of the continent was the same distance as the Cloud Sea that separated it from the western continent. He couldn't imagine how big the entire thing was.

Damien thought to immerse himself in training to pass the time, but it was already too late for that. The mana density had been steadily increasing for the past day or so, and he felt it was reaching its peak soon.

In the distance, he saw a coiling mountain range that corresponded to a picture on his map. It was the point of separation between the central region and the rest of the continent.

Flying over these mountains, a new world was opened to Damien's eyes. Even though it was blurry due to distance, he saw massive cities that spanned larger distances than some small states in America.

They were far from each other, but he was still able to see a few due to his current altitude. And even from this height, he could feel many strong auras radiating from these cities.

‘So many 3rd classes! And even 4th classes are appearing occasionally!’

If there was one thing he was supremely confident in, it was his aura-sensing abilities. They stemmed from his eyes, and with the kind of name they had, he was sure they wouldn’t fail him.

The vast difference in sheer manpower he sensed simply from this broad inspection was enough to shock him. After all, on Apeiron, there were very few 3rd classes and even fewer 4th classes.

‘Then why is Apeiron also considered a middle world?’

Frankly, he couldn’t compare the two in strength or mana density. The Cloud Plane was leagues better. But Damien had seen the mural on the temple walls that showed Apeiron in its prime. He knew the conditions had to be different back then.

‘Then, is it because of the war?’

He didn’t know how the war could have such a lasting adverse effect on the planet, but he could only think of this reason for its stasis. It had been 1000 years since its end, but the world wasn’t able to recover.

‘However, the Nox who attacked it...’

He knew for certain they had recovered. Not only were they targeting the Cloud Plane, but also earth and many other worlds by extension.

They were his first thought when he heard about vile cultivators, but he had suppressed this thought. He didn't have enough faith in human nature to believe only Nox believers took such wicked cultivation paths.

‘And some of them could even be hiding in plain sight.’

He didn't trust the righteous path purely based on its name either. From what he knew, the righteous path was simply where people schemed in the dark rather than in the open.

He didn't want to discount the efforts of those truly good people that existed, but his worldview was pessimistic, to say the least.

He has never believed that people could act purely out of the good of their hearts. Everyone had selfish intentions, even the best of people. He despised people who acted innocent on the outside but were the worst monsters in reality.

Noticing that his thoughts had skewed, Damien focused once again on the scenery around him. By this point, Zara had already taken him close to the general location of the Celestial Star Palace.

“Hmm, from what the map says, the next city should be the closest to the sect. Let's stop there and see if we can gather some information before we leave.” Damien said.

Zara complied happily. Whenever he wasn't in his thoughts over the past week of travel, he had given her all the company she could ask for. Not only did they talk about various matters, but at one point they even landed and raced like they used to do in the past.

When they reached the periphery of the city, Damien noticed that there was a long queue to enter. "This reminds me of last time." He said as he reminisced on their entrance to Archdale.

Unlike that time, though, the strength of the average person was much larger. Damien wouldn't be able to trailblaze his way into the city. Even among these common people that he saw, there were plenty of 2nd classes.

Zara shrank to the size of a normal carriage before entering the line. Tamed beasts were much more common in this world, so there was no problem.

Or at least, that's what Damien thought. As he calmly sat in meditation on Zara's back, a commotion started taking place behind him.

"Make way! Make way! My young master has no need to stand in line with filth like you!" A booming voice resounded.

And the people did indeed make way. Seeing the symbol on the side of the cart, they didn't dare to even make a sound to express their grievances.

"That's the Wang Clan insignia."

"That's right, they are cemented in 3rd place among the 4 Great Clans."

“I heard that they have the backing of the Jade Heavenly Palace.”

“I heard from my uncle that their young master is to be wedded to the Xue Clan young miss.”

The carriage moved unimpeded through the hordes of people, unbothered by their murmurs before the driver spotted a large black obstruction in the distance.

“Make way, or don’t blame this servant for trampling you!”

However, the obstruction didn’t move. Damien, who had just exited his meditation, sat calmly atop Zara’s back, suppressing the smile that was threatening to form on his lips.

‘Is this my first young master interaction?’

Zara had her own pride, so even without Damien’s instruction, she didn’t budge. As the carriage approached, the murmurs of the crowd became more prominent.

“Who is that?”

“I don’t recognize him, but his beast seems very powerful.”

“Maybe he’s a secluded young master?”

“To have a beast like that, he must have some status.”

“He’s quite handsome. Maybe this big sister can climb the social ladder through him.”

“Don’t dream, lady! If he has the guts to obstruct the Wang Clan carriage, why would he fall for an ugly hag like you?”

“What’d you say?!”

The carriage neared Zara, but as warned, it didn’t stop in the slightest. In fact, the driver slightly sped up in a bid to cleanly dispose of the ones barring his path.

The two lion-like beasts that were pulling the carriage ran at full speed with ferocious expressions, kicking up large gusts of wind that pushed back any cultivator it came in contact with

However, just as the beasts were going to collide with Zara, they stopped abruptly. It wasn’t that they wanted to, but their paws had been frozen to the ground below them, almost fusing the two surfaces into one. If the beasts pulled a little too hard, their paws might cleanly separate from their bodies.

From within the carriage, a massive thump was heard, followed by a billowing aura.

“Who dares stop this young master?!”

Chapter 120 - Separation [3]

“Who dares stop this young master?!”

A relatively young voice yelled from within the carriage. From the previous thump, it was clear that the owner of the voice had been flung into the wall or floor due to the abrupt stop.

The carriage door opened and out stepped a young man with black hair and eyes. His build was mostly slim, however, his most glaring feature was his height.

‘This guy is tiny!’

If Damien had to make a guess, he’d say the man in front of him was 5 foot 2 inches maximum. He might even be shorter than that.

“Who gave you permission to stare at me?!” The man yelled angrily when his eyes landed on Damien.

‘Is it a typical young master thing or does this guy have a Napoleon Complex?’

Still, Damien kept his mouth shut, choosing to observe before acting. He was still new to this world, so it was unwise to do anything stupid.

‘Well, if I get some backing I should be fine.’

The young man quickly became further incensed by Damien’s lack of reaction, but his eyes suddenly lit up in ‘realization’.

“Oh, I get it. You must be some sort of country bumpkin! Hmph, my name is Wang Ming, now quickly kneel before me so I can go on with my day.”

The whole situation was quite comical. Rather than a normal young master interaction like Damien was expecting, he had simply met a clown.

“Perhaps I really should kneel? Maybe only by doing this would we be able to see eye to eye.”

Faint giggles began spreading through the crowd as people understood the meaning behind Damien’s words. Unfortunately, Wang Ming seemed to be lacking in the brains department as well.

“Hmph, as expected of trash like you. It’s good that you know when to kneel.”

Recalling the conversations he heard in the crowd earlier, Damien began to feel sorry for the Xue Clan’s young miss. Unless she was equally stupid, it’d be a shame for anyone to have to marry this guy.

Feeling disappointed by the interaction, Damien simply communicated with Zara to leave.

“Kid, you’re too much of an idiot for this to be any fun, so maybe next time you should come back with someone better.”

However, Wang Ming naturally wasn’t satisfied. “Did I give you permission to leave?!”

Without warning, he pulled his arm back and punched forward, sending a large dragon made of flames toward Damien.

‘This kid is just a 2nd class and still has the nerve to act like this. Is this what they call having eyes but can’t see?’ Damien wondered.

Still, he wasn’t someone to take insults lying down. Since Wang Ming wanted to be humiliated so badly, Damien would just oblige him.

Disregarding the fire dragon that wouldn’t be able to harm him even if he simply stood there and allowed it to hit him, Damien pointed his finger at Wang Ming.

‘Let’s just do this then.’

Dropping his finger slightly, Damien adjusted his aim before shooting off two concentrated beams of lightning.

Without even waiting to see the results, he turned and continued into the city, leaving a slight glance at the carriage driver as he left. With the line already being parted due to Wang Ming’s earlier actions, he didn’t have any trouble.

As he entered the city, Damien heard a shrill cry from behind him, followed by the muffled laughter of the crowd.

Any clothing below Wang Ming’s waist had been burned to a crisp, becoming ash and exposing his lower body. The inevitable showing of his tiny member was what caused the crowd to laugh.

While Wang Ming continued being comedic relief, the driver of the carriage watched Damien's receding back in interest.

'The second young master needs to grow up, so interactions like this are necessary. However, the first young master will not be pleased when he learns of this.'

He had seen through Damien's intent even before the lightning had been released, yet he did nothing. Damien was also aware of this, as the old man's aura concealment couldn't fool his eyes.

'That young man's talents shouldn't be small. Maybe the first young master might even find a rival.'

Without speaking another word, the old driver used his mana to cover Wang Ming's exposed legs and led him back into the carriage.

As they departed into the city, Wang Ming was seething.

"A random trash bastard dares to humiliate this young master?! I will find some way to punish him, I swear it!"

As he partook in his rage-fueled monologue, he finally realized the meaning of Damien's earlier jab. "Dammit!" He slammed his fist against the wall.

"I'll make sure first brother makes him pay!"

Meanwhile, Damien was curiously looking through the city. The atmosphere was just as bustling as major cities in Apeiron like Aurora, but there was something inherently different that he couldn't place his finger on.

Still, this wasn't his focus. To his surprise, the talk of the town was perfectly in sync with his current goals.

"Quick, quick! Didn't you hear? The Celestial Star Palace is holding its disciple examination in 3 days!"

"Really? When I grow up and become a strong cultivator, I'm going to join the sect!"

"Stop dreaming! The Celestial Star Palace is the second-best sect in the entire world! How could you get in?"

"Well, I want to get accepted to the Jade Heavenly Palace! Second-ranked is too little for me!"

As he listened to the various conversations, Damien couldn't help but be amazed at the impeccable timing of it all.

'Don't tell me fate is actually a real thing?'

It was only then he realized he hadn't even done proper research on the sect.

‘Well, I have 3 days to do so. Plus, it shouldn’t be too hard, right?’

What Damien had forgotten was that he was dirt poor in this world. He was so used to not caring about money that he forgot how necessary the resource truly was.

For the next day, he didn’t even take the time to enter a hotel or inn, simply spending all his time trying to gain information on the sect. And while he was largely unsuccessful, he was able to gain some general knowledge.

As its name suggested, the Celestial Star Palace was highly focused on such concepts. Not only was it a martial sect that cared about offensive prowess, but it also had a unique specialization in divination.

Now, Damien didn’t necessarily believe in divination, but with mana anything was possible. He couldn’t simply write it off as falsehood especially when such a large sect prioritized it.

‘Not to mention, I don’t really have anywhere else to go.’

Besides the fact that he was poor and had little knowledge of the Cloud Plane in general, he also found that the sect was even considered righteous among the righteous path. With its reputation, he didn’t see a harm in trying to join them.

He didn’t have any knowledge of divination, but it clearly had some correlation to time. And from his previous meditations, he was already aware of how closely interlinked space and time were.

The disciple examinations were open to anyone below the age of 60, which was still relatively young, especially in a world like this one. With the large number of 4th class beings in the world, meeting people whose age surpassed 1000 wasn't too uncommon.

The sect was still a few days of travel away, so after he gained this knowledge, he immediately set out.

'I can't miss this chance to get free housing...cough...I mean to expand my horizons.'