

Void 1791

Chapter 1791 Death's Hold [1]

Damien walked the forest for a long while. He didn't know how long he spent walking, but he was subconsciously looking for the water that woman waded through.

He felt like he could find something there. Even if it wasn't a vestige of what once was, it would be something.

The black forest didn't have the same eerie atmosphere as it did when Damien first arrived here. Perceiving it through the lens of the story instead of the rumors of the outside world, Damien felt a pang of sorrow in his heart.

He didn't know why.

He tried to analyze it as he searched for the black water, but an answer didn't come to him.

There wasn't a single logical reason for him to feel sorrow of all things. Sympathy, maybe. Curiosity, maybe. Sorrow, however, was not an emotion he could feel towards the black forest.

It existed because it existed. There wasn't anything sorrowful about it.

While Existence was a wide expanse of perceivable space, this was the only possible location where the black half of the forest could reside, so its location also was not unfortunate.

At the end of the day, it also received the means to have its existence acknowledged. Though it was more difficult, it was more meaningful as only the most powerful men and women in the entirety of Existence could find it.

It was not necessarily a sorrowful existence. Not unless it had a mind of its own.

That thought led Damien down another lane. 'What if the sorrow I feel is not my own emotion.'

Through the story, he learned that a vessel was necessary for the whiteness and blackness to gain meaning.

The whiteness that characterized Existence already found what it wanted. It birthed everything that was known, and every achievement made was attributed to it.

Every life and every death was attributed to it. In every waking moment, it was given praise.

What about the blackness of Nonexistence?

If Damien had to say whether it achieved things or not, he would definitely say it had.

However, was it satisfied with just that?

If Existence and Nonexistence, concepts created by the Void so everything else could be born, also had subtle spirituality and the ability to at least somewhat recognize emotion, would it be satisfied seeing its counterpart achieving everything it could not?

Did this sorrow originate from the fact that it was feared by all?

Was it caused by the misunderstandings that Existence unintentionally created about it?

Nonexistence seemed like a concept too far separated from living beings for it to ever be touched. Any and all beings with consciousness feared nothingness.

They looked at nothingness as the end, as the unknown, as death. They associated it with all of their most negative concepts and thoughts, and that became its definition.

However, did the people know?

Nonexistence was more connected to them than even Existence.

Existence had set laws. The people worked hard to comprehend them, and those who succeeded to a greater degree were rewarded with their comprehensions' addition to the world's existing laws.

If the people never tried to touch Existence, would it have ever responded to them?

Nonexistence was different.

It was just like the human mind.

There was no real form to it in the beginning.

It was created alongside Existence and many other things that served different purposes, large and small.

Realistically, it was meant to follow a straight path for the sake of survival.

But that was not the case.

The human mind had an unbelievable potential for growth that no other mind could replicate. It took the world in stride and granted countless paths to follow. Free will to become whatever it could possibly want to be. That was what the human mind possessed that others couldn't fathom.

Nonexistence was no different.

It never had a form to begin with, but it took on infinite paths as it wasn't constrained to the same conventions put in place by Existence.

It grew through the thoughts of people. As other concepts were related to it, it grew and evolved, becoming something impossible if it weren't for their accidental recognition of its form.

If nobody dreamed of what didn't exist, Nonexistence would still just be a small black forest.

Was that why the concept fell in love with them?

Was that why it felt sorrow when it realized that it would never be able to truly interact with them?

Nobody understood.

The people who came here always assumed they needed to slay the beasts in Death's Hold. They always acted without thought, so they died.

Those who had a bit more sense tried to interpret the story, but only saw it as a portrayal of good and evil.

They viewed Nonexistence as a weapon. They viewed it as the power they needed to complement Existence and erase their enemies and woes.

Nobody saw its true value, so everyone died.

When they tried to build on its origin while disrespecting it, wasn't it normal for the concept to lash out?

So, in the end, what did Nonexistence want?

Did it want recognition? Did it want respect? Was it chasing a futile dream to become like Existence?

No.

'All it wants is to be recognized.'

Damien understood well.

He never quite worried about it. He was always too focused on getting to whatever goal he was chasing to pay attention to it.

However, didn't he suffer alone for a long time?

In the First Dungeon, he went insane and came back from the depths on his own. That was the start of it.

He met many people who helped him in many ways. He gained connections that he never would have reached this point without.

However, when he truly struggled, he was always on his own.

Nobody could match his progress. Nobody could move at his pace. He found himself going from place to place. Almost every time, he made friends and acquaintances. Still, none of those people could ever accompany him to the depths he traversed.

It was always too dangerous for others. It was always he who had to do the most difficult things.

And he was fine with that. That was never the problem.

But...it was tiring.

It was tiring to struggle and fight to survive, to come from nothing and become something and have nobody know his story.

It was tiring to see how people interacted with him, telling him how much he was this or that without realizing how much pain he'd gone through to stand where he stood.

When he saw the true faces of Grand Heavens Boundary and the Saint Emperor, he felt a sort of warmth from them.

They were people who had been watching from the beginning.

They understood how he became who he was at the time.

Grand Heavens Boundary acknowledged his struggle and made him feel something familial, which is why he had to save the universe at all costs.

The Saint Emperor was an enemy who fought him not because of old grudges or misplaced greed. At the end, the Saint Emperor fought him because he saw Damien as the only person who could surpass him and achieve what he couldn't. He acknowledged Damien's struggle in his own way.

There were a few more examples in Damien's life that kept him able to deal with the more tiring interactions. He had a support system that allowed him to struggle in silence without minding that others would never know how much he did.

What about Nonexistence?

Did it have anything like that?

Did it have the ability to stop struggling in silence even if it was tired and filled with Sorrow?

'No.'

It didn't.

'No.'

It didn't.

Not even in the slightest.

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Damien never found the river the woman walked.

Perhaps it was imaginary. Perhaps it was meant to represent the rift between the blackness and the whiteness, the area that no man had ever traversed.

If that was the case, then it wouldn't be here.

It was a bit of a shame for sure. Damien didn't necessarily need to see it anymore, but that water was symbolic. He wanted to experience it at least once.

He understood the source of the sorrow in his heart now. He also felt a deep sympathy that he didn't feel from the story alone.

He was understanding something too filled with emotion for it to be untrue.

The further his thoughts went down that path, the more the sorrow in his chest grew. It felt like Nonexistence was crying out, screaming into the void as it came face to face with its emotions.

He couldn't doubt and say that his perception of the scene was wrong anymore.

Did anyone else ever feel this emotion? If they felt how deep and tragic it was, how could they not understand what Nonexistence wanted to tell them?

Perhaps Damien was unique from the start. More unique than he expected.

After all, rather than Nonexistence, Damien saw Existence as his weapon.

His ability to control everything both material and immaterial was enough. Why did Nonexistence have to be a weapon as well?

When Damien entered this realm, he only knew what Nonexistence was on a very surface level. He didn't have any preconceived notions about it in the slightest, other than his thought that it would allow him to achieve the impossible.

He felt its grandiosity from the Dark God, and rather than being fearful, he started anticipating the day he could also control that force.

His lack of preconceptions made him a blank canvas to be influenced by this realm.

He could find out what he thought about Nonexistence by interacting with it.

And, frankly, after a scene like that, he felt more of a connection towards it than Existence.

Existence really was like that, wasn't it?

It merely existed. If it weren't for Damien's advantages and his path, then he never would have come in contact with it. He had to work to find out how to control it on his own. It never gave him clues or acted friendly in the slightest.

He comprehended it because he wanted to, not because it wanted him to.

Obviously, Nonexistence was forming more of a personal connection with Damien than its counterpart. Not because it wanted something from him, but because that was the approach it developed through its love for living beings.

It was not resigned to being a silent observer like Existence.

It wanted to touch them, feel them, and become one with them.

Damien just needed to give it that opportunity. It wanted to receive that chance purely. It didn't want it to be a business relationship.

It wanted Damien and every other person to recognize its pain and offer to save it.

But that was just a way to interpolate its emotions.

At the end of the day, its emotions were never so complex. It had a similar level of sentience to the Void. Sure it could make decisions against logic and sure it could act on its emotions, but its feelings would always remain at the basic level.

Fundamentally, these concepts did not have the ability to think and make complex assertions.

However, in Nonexistence's case specifically, the deep and simple emotion it felt was relayed through human experiences that had been attributed to it.

It used those experiences to convey the depth of its feeling rather than the complexity.

Damien was ready to make a genuine promise to the concept. His heart was clear, rid of all extraneous desires.

This was a different matter from the second island's challenge.

This was a promise he needed to make to Nonexistence for the sake of their future cooperation.

'No, this is how I bring the concept under my rule.'

If Damien was one thing, it was good to his subordinates. He always ensured that the people under him would live well and attain the things they dreamed of.

It was the same for his concepts. He would use them as much as they wanted to be used.

And if he wanted to become Absolute in the future...

'...I can absolutely make Nonexistence into a concept that is recognized as much as Existence.'

The black forest had been moving with Damien as he walked its grounds. It synced with him after he saw the vision, reading his thoughts and understanding his intentions.

It judged him and related to him. It finally felt like it found someone who could see its meaning, so it went deeper and deeper into his mind. It saw his past and struggle. Nonexistence noticed that Damien had come closer to it than anyone else, and as it went into the deepest recesses of his mind, it saw itself.

It saw itself housing Damien's ego as the Wheel of Samsara pulled away his soul.

And it saw how a certain manifestation appeared within its body to save him from that place and bring him back into the land of the living.

Despite an experience like that, Damien never seemed to attribute death to Nonexistence.

No, rather, the kind of death he almost received was the same death he always dreamed of.

A death that was both rebirth and true death. Where his ego was laid to eternal rest and his soul was gifted to the next person. Nonexistence liked Damien a lot. And when it realized the origins of the manifestation that appeared during Damien's death, it started to trust him as well.

Damien raised his hand gently until it was parallel to the ground. His fingers calmly drooped as they naturally did when he didn't actively try to control them. A drop of water appeared at the tip of his index. It slowly became bigger until it was large enough to be perceived by the human eye and stopped, falling away from his hand.

Its trip towards the earth was perceived in slow motion.

It was the first time Damien exerted his power in Death's Hold, but rather than an aggressive assertion of his dominance, it was a gentle request for acceptance.

The black forest reacted instantly.

The growling of beasts once again filled Damien's ears. They approached closer with auras of hostility, but they did not yet attack.

Their wariness was obvious. As was their desire to consume him. They were only waiting for the affirmation of their creator force to act.

The forest shook. The trees seemed to turn to face him. Everything seemed to turn to face him.

The pitch-black leaves that drifted in the wind froze. The wind itself froze. The creatures froze, the sound of their growls fading below the sound of that single drop of water.

It was the only thing that continued to move. Even Damien himself remained frozen.

In the still world where Damien stood at the center, a miracle happened.

WHOOOOSH!

A huge sound filled Death's Hold.

And a gushing river filled the gaping hole in its heart.

Chapter 1793 Death's Hold [3]

The water was black, dyed by the surroundings. It was a part of Death's Hold, but it wasn't always that way.

Merely, when it accepted Damien, it changed. From past to present to future, if one looked at one's memories of this place, there would always be a river. Damien smiled.

'So you accepted.'

He knew the concept couldn't communicate with him, but he was glad it accepted his sincerity.

It might have seemed improbable for him to be the only person to recognize the emotional aspect of the story in the eons that this realm existed, but it actually wasn't.

In the first place, Supreme Beings did not consider emotions very often. Damien found his humanity drifting further and further away from him with every passing day.

He was still able to recognize emotions so well because he valued them. Putting aside his love for many people and the emotions they brought him, emotions had always been important to Damien.

He remembered the depression he felt before he fell into the First Dungeon. There was a kind of raw yet naive hopelessness in his system that had never afflicted him again after that day.

When he first fell into the dungeon, he felt desperation and fear. As he progressed through it, he lost many of his emotions to madness and bloodlust.

In Apeiron, he gained them back. In the Cloud Plane, he gained an opportunity to get rid of them.

Over and over again after that, from his adventures in the Human Domain to the tales of Grand Heavens Boundary and beyond, emotions had been a big part of his journey.

However, each and every time he worried about it, ruminated over it, and overcame it.

He always managed to keep those emotions safe, even if they had to be confined to a single aspect of his life.

If it weren't for his emotions, he wouldn't have reached this point. He couldn't remember how many times the pure indifference in the core of his soul threatened to eat away at all of his emotions. However, each and every time he worried about it, ruminated over it, and overcame it.

He always managed to keep those emotions safe, even if they had to be confined to a single aspect of his life.

As someone who had such a connection to emotions, when he reached a place above the clouds where even human life was nothing to him, he did not lose those emotions and ascend in mind.

Most of the others here did. Before they entered the Land of Nothingness, they allowed indifference to be the core of their character. They permitted it to rule their lives.

Sure, the Land of Nothingness that turned them forgotten changed them and reintroduced them to many of the emotions they lacked, but was that enough?

It was like they were given new life. The emotions they felt were heightened like their hormones were imbalanced. They made impulsive decisions regularly and needed to consciously understand how to keep their emotions in check and feel them only to a moderate level.

Maybe people like that existed on the later islands, but they definitely weren't here.

On the second island where the true bottom tier of the Forgotten resided, emotions dictated everything.

Pride, greed, and lust. Anger, joy, and sorrow.

Within the swirl of human emotion that each and every one of them felt, it was impossible to distinguish the woes of Nonexistence and sympathize.

No, in their reckless states, they'd take the scene at face value and die before they had a chance to reconsider from a more mature perspective.

Some of them may have even been overwhelmed by that sorrow. It mixed perfectly with the sorrow they felt being stuck on this island and amplified it.

Maybe this place was called Death's Hold because it was the place people went to succumb to exactly that.

Nevertheless, it had nothing to do with Damien.

The life he chose to lead was what allowed him to reap benefits like these. He didn't feel remorse, guilt, or sympathy. Instead, as he stared down at the black water running over his feet, he wondered about something else entirely.

'What should I build?' People went with castles because they were easier to build on a larger scale. They were symmetric and the exterior structure was extremely simple to create.

Once they had experience making the exterior, they could then the interior into a much more ornate space by focusing on smaller areas one by one.

It was a good strategy to both grow and create something lasting. Every castle in this land was unique, despite there being thousands of them. However, it wasn't Damien's style. He wasn't really a "castle" person.

He liked Void Palace architecturally because of its intricate inner space that was like a maze of different dimensions. It was ingenious and unique, a feat that forced others to admire it.

The exterior was a masterpiece, but it was still similar to many other palaces because their base structure always had to be relatively similar. With what he'd experienced in claiming this land, he didn't just want to populate it with a regular palace like any other. He wanted to do something special with this place, something that would truly honor Nonexistence's origin. He started building without a goal, just seeing where his thoughts would take him.

Oddly enough, what came from his energy was not necessarily a man-made structure at all.

Rather, it was nature.

The black river was soon surrounded by small critters and creatures who were not afraid of its current. The beasts who originally lived in the forest approached warily, captivated by their harmless appearances.

The ground was just black and filled with debris similar to wood chips. That changed immediately. A sprawling display of flora populated the ground and created space for a thriving environment.

Sure it was all the same black color as the rest of the forest, making it difficult to discern, but that didn't matter.

The beauty of this place was not meant to be recognized by anything other than the concept it was created by.

As Damien's power continued to thrive, Death's Hold itself began to expand. A huge clearing was made in the middle of the forest, from which a tree more massive than any other was born.

It rose high into the clouds, branching out into a complex canopy that looked more like a labyrinth than the top of a tree.

The trunk was lined with steps that spiraled it from top to bottom. They didn't serve any purpose but to make the tree accessible. There was nothing built for those steps to lead to.

The forest's vibrance was far beyond what it was before. It continued to grow as Nonexistence accepted Damien's interference.

He focused mainly on the environment since he wanted to see Death's Hold transform, but if he wanted to keep others from ruining the sanctity of the area, then he still had to create something here that signified his ownership.

Then, what could he create to scare away intruders while still maintaining the sanctity of the forest he created?

'I know.'

It was time to have a little bit of fun with Nonexistence.

Well, it would be fun for him.

For the enemies who would reveal themselves soon enough after seeing Death's Hold's changes, however...

...obviously, it was going to be the most fun they ever had. If it wasn't, then it was also fine if they just died.

Chapter 1794 Death's Hold [4]

If Damien had started creating like a normal person, he probably would've had a decent amount of time before people noticed his movements.

However, the change in Death's Hold was too big. The great tree was enough to attract attention from all corners of the island, and the fact that the forest itself became as large as a country even more.

Again, "change" wasn't a thing in this realm. The forest couldn't become anything it wasn't even if it had all the power in the world.

The only way to enact change in the Land of Nothingness was for an individual to actively do so.

Naturally, everyone was going to pay attention to the mysterious person who changed Death's Hold.

There were hundreds of "Noble Lords" on the second island. Most of them were reclusive and only focused on ways to find a way to the third island. They were the ones who bought land but did not use it.

Every Lord lived in a castle, but they were nothing more than squatters. The people who built those castles were gone. They already moved on from the second island, and their creations were mobbed by people who had been stuck here for many, many eons.

Damien was something of a new kid on the block. He didn't understand how the layers of society were decided. He didn't even know what the "stages of power" people created to mark their progress were.

He definitely had access to that information, but he didn't care.

What did it have to do with him?

All he needed to know was that some idiots who weren't good enough to do things on their own wanted to stop others from accomplishing things as well. They would be here to test him as soon as they could arrive.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the one they would be fighting. 'I want to see how they move.'

The battle tactics created in a place like this were bound to be interesting. Rather than experiencing them himself, Damien preferred to just watch from the sidelines for now.

After all, the current enemies weren't worth his time. He had more important things to worry about.

'Like the nature of my build.'

He pretty much knew what he wanted to do. In concept, it was a living home.

He wanted to create a creature with sentience that would serve as a guardian for the great tree. At the same time, he wanted something permanent that would be seen by all and recognized as a symbol of his existence.

When it came to the guardian part, he had several ideas. The problem was that he didn't know how to incorporate the latter half of his plan into the guardian forms he'd thought of.

Why was he thinking of making an abode that he would never live in?

Castles dominated this land so it was easy for his view to get clouded by the norm. He wanted to make something more "human." Something man-made that didn't seem like it appeared naturally.

Just like everyone else, he wanted to make his own mark on this forest.

He couldn't allow the black forest to remain a symbol of sorrow for Nonexistence. Instead, he wanted to turn it into a symbol of their unity so the concept could always look back and reaffirm that it was understood.

'Hmm...'

A house wasn't right no matter how he thought about it. It was a stupid idea that he couldn't understand.

Then, what could he build?

For humans, the way to mark their presence was to build statues or monuments. Either that or buildings with unique structures that also had uses in society.

When he didn't need money from tourism, statues were out of the question. Who was he supposed to build a statue of?

When he didn't need to give his structure any sort of practicality, buildings were not the answer either.

'I guess it comes down to that.'

In this stage of his life, given the kind of creative freedom that came from controlling such vague concepts, he started to form that kind of desire.

'I want to make something beautiful.'

He wanted to make art.

He scanned the forest with his eyes.

'Something that doesn't interfere with the forest, but makes it obvious that it's built, not bred.'

He just had to let his mind work naturally again.

Damien never had much symbolism around him. Void Palace had a symbol, as did almost all of the other influences he joined. However, he was not trying to represent those entities right now.

Dante told him just how much his name mattered right now. When he returned, when the Firmament Board came to him, he would need to have more confidence in that name than anything else.

'A symbol to represent me...'

What was it supposed to be?

He wasn't too good at this kind of thing. Damien knew what made up the core of his soul, however, he never really cared about how others perceived him.

A symbol only existed for others to perceive. For Damien to make something he was proud of, he first needed to decide what kind of person he wanted to present himself as.

'I'm not a tyrant.'

Not to the people who followed him. However, to those who opposed him, he was willing to be the cruelest person they ever dreamed of.

So he needed to show dominance and compassion at the same time.

It had to be a symbol that could be regarded with fear or worship depending on the lens it was viewed through.

'The color...'

It was quite important. People were quick to form subconscious biases off of color alone.

Black had always been associated with evil, right? But the pure blackness of Nonexistence wasn't evil in the slightest. It was misunderstood and misconstrued by association.

'White as a background would be most obvious, but I don't really like that.'

Damien had a new goal to make Nonexistence a concept as sacred as Existence in the eyes of the people. If so, then the stigmas associated with colors would change as well.

Void Palace's symbol also contained black as its main color, but it was seen as sleek and powerful rather than fearful.

He was already going to use black from the start. It wasn't just a color that represented Nonexistence, but one that represented the Void.

Purple was also an obvious choice. It symbolized his lineage. When he was young, his aura and mana were purple for a time as well. The color had deep connections to his roots, so obviously he was going to include it.

'Then...gold.'

It was for a bit more of a common reason than the rest. Gold was often a color used to represent regality, so he wanted subtle accents of it in the symbol.

And finally...

'...white.'

Not an extraneous amount. Just enough to make everything else pop.

Everything about this symbol had to mean something to Damien just as much as it meant something to others.

The colors were set. The shape and the design still had to be decided.

Watching Damien struggle in his artistic endeavors was fun, but there was definitely something more interesting to pay attention to.

Currently, on the border of Death's Hold, three people stood and faced its darkness.

They were the first of many invaders to come.

And, more importantly, they were the ones who'd show Damien how people who had only been using Nonexistence for millions of years at the very least fought.

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The three who arrived first were the youngest of the Lords. This didn't imply that they were young, but that they were forced by people much older than them to go and test the waters.

They were all old men. Their beards were white and the hair on the top of their heads was nonexistent. Without mana or Existence, the mechanisms used by practitioners to alter their appearances were rendered useless. The appearance they maintained would be the same one they had when their bodies became immortal and their lifespans increased.

Damien was over a hundred. In Earth terms, he'd be an old man, but with a lifespan of infinity, he was extremely young. He also never attempted to alter his appearance. His current look was as natural as it got, so he wasn't affected.

Unfortunately for many of those who reached greater heights at older ages, the young appearances they gave themselves were taken away and they were forced to deal with the fact that this was their true age.

Damien would be meeting quite a few old men and women in the future, so he'd already resigned to being the only relatively young-looking person here.

Nevertheless, his attention was half focused on these three men. The other half focused on the design.

Damien didn't actually need to do anything. The beasts in Death's Hold had been tamed to an extent now that they knew what peace felt like, but that was only concerning Damien and the other creatures in the Black Forest.

Their attitude towards intruders never changed.

If those three people stepped into this place and tried to cause a scene, they would die.

Clearly, they knew that as well. They hesitated on the edge of the forest for a very long time, trying to sense the situation inside.

They were fated to learn that it was impossible. If they wanted to investigate, they had to go inside.

These three were in an unfortunate situation, really.

Behind them stood hundreds of other Lords who would definitely make their lives hard if they returned empty-handed. They wouldn't be able to peacefully live on the second island anymore. Hell, they wouldn't even be able to create their structures and move on to the third island because of their interference.

In front of them stood a land of death from which not a single man had returned alive.

Was death better than a hellish life?

It was a question they didn't want to answer, but in this case, they had no choice but to push forward. They'd signed a pact of nothingness when they joined the ranks of the Lords.

They would act for the good of the group. If they failed to do so, they would be exterminated by the laws of the realm.

This applies to all of the rest of them as well, but they didn't need to experience the downsides of the pact when they were the ones who controlled everything.

The three of them glanced at each other with wry expressions.

Despite their thoughts, they were already moving closer to the densely packed black trees that acted like a wall protecting the forest from outsiders.

Immediately upon making their choice, the three of them released their power.

It was mostly unperceivable, but there were still signs. For instance, the man on the left side had a subtle ring of black fire circling him. It was an indicator that he and the rest were surrounded by domains. Damien subtly sent his power outward, making contact with the borders of their domains.

He instantly felt changes in his body.

'I see.'

It was a matter of preparation indeed.

The most obvious use of the domain was to even the playing field.

Whether the opponent had an advantage or not, it would bring them to the same level as the caster of the skill in order to absolve any advantages that they could possess.

In Damien's case, his physical strength plummeted.

'I'm not suppressed insanely, but it's considerable. I guess this is the average physical strength of those three.'

He had only been brought down to their level, not below it.

'Is it the battle etiquette of this realm?'

It was reasonable. If they were to fight properly with their Nonexistence, then it was obvious for them to compete at the same level.

They didn't make any drastic moves after that. They approached the forest carefully and stayed within each other's sight. Their domains overlapped, creating a huge zone of suppression that would give them an advantage against any being they faced. They weren't facing ordinary beings this time.

They knew that, which was why they came even closer together when they took their first step into the forest.

When Damien entered, there was still a process to things. The beasts wouldn't attack anyone who entered. They'd only attack when certain conditions were met.

Technically, those conditions were already met by the group of three, but even then they would have been given at least a few seconds to put away their hostility before they were assaulted.

Damien's claim on this territory changed things.

The beasts now regarded him in the same light as Nonexistence. As such, anyone other than him had been banned from this forest.

The beasts did not need to use pack tactics to confront their enemies.

Each and every one of them had equal power—absolute power in this realm. One was enough to face the three of them, however, whether it was out of respect or mockery, three beasts stood up to the challenge, one for each Lord. And a silent battle began immediately.

As Damien's intention was never to kill them in a dominant fashion, the beasts went easier with their attacks. Otherwise, how was Damien supposed to learn about battle?

A battle between two different forms of Existence was incredibly loud. Damien had fought such a battle twice in his life, and both times, they were filled with extreme scenes of splendor as reality itself was toyed with.

In its regular fashion, Nonexistence remained invisible even when it was being used aggressively.

There was indeed a battle being fought, but to an unaware observer, it looked like the beasts and the Lords were just staring at each other with hostile expressions.

Damien saw a different scene.

To him, this was just as grand as a battle of Existence.

Hidden away from the world in a conceptual realm that even the greatest Gods couldn't perceive was a battle so beautiful that he didn't know how to describe it.

Concepts were eliminated and new concepts grew in their place. The realm was like a mirage of shifting colors and imageries that would constantly change as the concepts inhabiting the space were altered.

It was a real back-and-forth fight. If one person couldn't absolutely dominate, then they were forced to take turns and test each other's skills.

Like a competition with deadly stakes, the two opposing fighters would challenge each other to find their alterations and respond before they were set in stone.

Once one person made a change that the other could not detect, it acted as an anchor off of which countless other changes could be made and woven together into a fabric that the other side couldn't pierce.

'Is it like chess?'

Not exactly, but it was a strategy game of some sort.

The knowledge and experience necessary to fight this kind of battle against people who had been doing it for so long...

'...I don't have it.'

The situation was more serious than he expected. If Damien decided to go out there and fight personally, he probably would have been crushed.

'I guess I need to take my time before going to the third island.'

Something told him that the upcoming trials wouldn't be so peaceful.

If Damien wanted to rapidly reach the end of this land and return to his home, he needed to get a lot more familiar with Nonexistence.

And right now, he was in both the perfect environment and the perfect state to do exactly that.

Chapter 1796 Death's Hold [6]

The three Lords fought the beasts of the forest for many hours. In the process, Damien was able to learn more and more about how veterans maneuvered Nonexistence.

'It's still the second island, so they can't do much. They're making as much use of the little power they have as possible. That's a state where creativity shines.' From Damien's observations, there were several common concepts that people usually chose to banish from existence 'If it was in the real world, mana would probably be the first.'

Without mana, only physical fighters and people who used Nonexistence could survive.

When physical strength differences were controlled through the establishment of a territory, only one of those groups could come out alive.

'In this place, it's a little bit more vague. Since they're fighting beasts, too, they're focusing more on the mind than the body.'

They were trying to banish things like "rationality" and "loyalty" from their enemies' minds.

Against groups, this kind of strategy was ingenious. Rather than putting in work, forcing the opponents to fight each other was more efficient. 'When they're facing the beasts individually, though, they immediately bring those things back and try to use them in the opposite way.' While focusing on obvious things like the opponent's strength, they used concepts like loyalty to disrupt their mind and make them hesitate to attack.

The problem the three Lords encountered when they found themselves in a prolonged fight with the beasts was that their enemies were using completely different kinds of concepts than them. The beasts

didn't have the kind of complex thought process necessary to banish and manipulate concepts like the Lords.

However, they were connected to a far more primordial form of energy. They were able to find the rawest and most core concepts in the universe and banish them, instantly taking the most important strengths of the Lords away from them.

In the first place, it was supposed to be a one-sided slaughter, not a fight.

Nevertheless, before the three Lords died, Damien was able to gain sufficient data to incorporate into his own fighting techniques.

'And, I finished this thing.'

He looked down at a flag he'd created for testing purposes. On it, there was a symbol. One that represented Damien Void from his own perspective.

The symbol was a circular swirling black and white image. The two colors were used equally, but it did not look like it. Instead, it looked like the black side was consuming the white side.

However, if one viewed it from a different perspective, the white and black were in constant motion, ebbing and flowing together like the calm waves of the sea.

The pattern was lined with gold to accentuate it and add a sense of valor. As for the purple elements, Damien originally wanted to scrap it but decided that the color was too important for him to ignore.

It also turned into an accent like the gold, but with its addition, two more pictures were created.

With the gold outline alone, one could see the intricate head of a dragon preparing its breath. With the purple outline alone, one could see a crescent moon within a fog of clouds.

Together, however, they illuminated the white and black in a yin and yang style picture of a world. All-encompassing power, all-encompassing compassion. A strength that rivaled the dragons, yet a leadership as calm and orderly as the movement of the moon.

It was extremely intricate to the point where most people who saw it wouldn't be able to recognize its intent, but it was everything Damien could have hoped for when creating his own symbol.

As long as he worked to properly establish the reputation that followed it, he could give it the meaning he desired in the eyes of others.

But that was only something to worry about when he returned to the Heavenly World.

In this place, that symbol was one of conquest.

Many Lords followed after the first three. The group of them didn't plan to end things easily, but they weren't given a choice.

They sent tens of their members to attack the forest. After realizing that it was an extreme danger with the deaths of the first three, they organized a task force with great numbers and even greater power to siege it and get rid of the being inside.

Unfortunately, Damien had already satisfied his curiosity.

The beasts no longer had a reason to hold back and prolong fights for him to watch.

That was the reason why Damien had the freedom to design a symbol and determine what kind of structure he was going to build while Death's Hold was actively being assaulted.

Anyone who stepped into the forest would die with one attack from the beasts.

They could try to attack from outside, but the tree wall was incredibly thick. It seemed impervious to any and all damage, as even the outer layer refused to chip after being attacked over and over again.

Strategies were enacted to attack from the sky, but those failed as well.

What would Death's Hold be if it wasn't secure?

With the addition of a great tree to its ranks, the size of its domain greatly expanded. There was a large, impenetrable dome of Nonexistence around the entire area, created by the Land of Nothingness itself.

That land was impervious to all but Damien.

They might have possessed a slight chance of entering it beforehand, but it had a new owner now.

It had finally recognized the individual it had been searching for.

Now, the people who wanted to take it for granted and use it for their own purposes could be killed without remorse, as they no longer served a use.

The Lords were forced to take a step back after the initial siege failed.

They could absolutely send troops after troops into Death's Hold, but what was the point of sacrificing people like that?

Unlike most of the realm, death in the hold was permanent. Nobody wanted to risk that. True Death in a place like this...

If they died, their existence would be erased from reality entirely.

All memories of them, all vestiges they left, and all clues that told of their existence would be wiped.

It would be like they were never born.

That was the most terrifying kind of death, wasn't it?

Nobody wanted to suffer from it. Even the Lords who were usually extremely particular about how they acted refused to continue chasing after Damien.

If he could control Death's Hold, he could kill them all. What kind of idiot would make a person like that into an enemy?

The Lords that headed the group tried to meet Damien. They went to Death's Hold themselves with a peace offering.

Unfortunately, all they were greeted with was silence.

They had already confirmed that there was a man there, but this was the moment when they realized that they weren't meant to be messing with that man from the beginning.

On the trunk of the great tree, overlooking the entirety of the second island, was an eye sunk into its surface.

It was massive and purple, standing out immensely while still complementing the colors of the forest.

The eye looked down at them. The entire forest's attention turned to them as it glowed with a fierce light.

An engraved pattern in the trunk's surface above the eye came to light, filled with the same glow as the eye itself.

The top Lords looked at each other as the eye activated.

And, together, they stared down at their own trembling hands.

Their fingers...

Their fingers were disappearing from existence.

Not in the usual temporary fashion, but eternally.

Every single Lord on the island received the same message that night.

"Give up. Challenging Death's Hold is certain death."

It was a warning that they'd heard many times, but one that never stopped adventurers from trying their luck.

However, this time was different.

This time, it was an absolute truth.

Anyone who entered Death's Hold without its owner's permission was bound to become fertilizer for its growth.

As such, the people of the second island could only quietly watch as that faceless individual changed the forest. They watched as a structure peeked out from above the canopy of trees and grew larger and larger.

Only, no matter how large it became, they couldn't tell what it was.

It wasn't their fault, though.

Because even if one asked its creator, he would respond with one simple sentence.

"I have no idea what the hell I'm doing."

Chapter 1797 Death's Hold [7]

It was definitely a beautiful structure. Just...nobody could say what it actually was.

It was biological. Two large leaves rose high into the sky and wrapped around the tree. The intricate details of their structure could be seen clearly as the black sun shined through. The small veins that lined them seemed to pulse like they were alive.

The tree itself was also raised far out of the ground. There was a hill where there used to only be flat ground, on which even the roots of the tree could be seen from a distance as it was so far above the rest of the forest.

That hill was where the rest of Damien's creation resided. It contained almost no black dirt. The tree's roots sunk into the structure itself, as if it was mounting itself on top.

In this state, the hill seemed to be adorned by some sort of mechanical masterpiece. It was split into several sections, each made of a complementary material that didn't exist in this realm. There were small spaces between each of them that contained bone-like structures that held them together.

The massive leaf wing structures were directly linked to the hill. Clearly, they were also involved in whatever mechanism the entire structure was meant to be.

The only thing that set it aside from the environment was its clearly man-made nature.

It was not an abode. It was not a sculpture. It didn't have any noticeable purpose. If anyone looked at it, while they would surely appreciate its strange beauty and the way it melded into the environment, they would still call the artist himself insane.

What was the purpose of something like this?

Why was it so highly mechanical if it didn't do anything?

There were sounds of gears turning, of processes being undertaken below the ground level.

Through the gaps in the segment, it was possible to see just a slight piece of the inner workings, which were complex enough to confuse even experienced engineers.

Damien sat on the hill that was lightly dusted with black dirt to help the beasts become familiar with it and patted its surface.

"You'll be in charge of this place when I leave."

He didn't get a response, but the slight vibration in the hill was enough.

He knew the being he created could hear him.

"Protect the beings who live here. Protect the legacy of this sacred place. And, protect my name."

Rumble!

If one could see below the dirt, one would finally be able to see the nature of Damien's creation.

Its entire body seemed to be made of mossy rocks. Its shell, which the great tree resided on, was segmented and filled with different colored minerals, but in the light they all seemed to reflect and refract to form a specific pattern, one that would become familiar as time passed in this realm. Four massive legs dug deep into the earth. They were at least several hundreds of feet long, supporting the massive body of the being that was even larger and wider.

It was essentially a giant, mechanical, walking turtle. The leaves cocooning the tree were obviously not to help it fly, but to be used to attack invaders and defend the tree.

There were several other attack mechanisms embedded in its structure. Each different material used on its shell contained different abilities, all of them based on Nonexistence.

Damien created a being that would be invincible in this place.

And, on the off chance that something terrible happened to Death's Hold, it could stand up and take the entire forest away on its back, protecting its legacy and inhabitants.

This was an absolute mechanism to ensure that the sanctity of the forest would never be destroyed in the future. At the same time, it left a massive mark of Damien's presence on the land.

In the event that it was forced to move after he left, then the amount of meaning it would give the only crest that identified the creator was also monstrous.

It was a being that met all of Damien's criteria.

Because of that, it was not easy to build in the slightest.

The entire landscape had to change. Damien was forced to learn a great deal about manipulating Nonexistence and the land itself.

Over the past two years, he gained more than enough experience to be confident moving on to the next island.

The connection he'd formed with Death's Hold was enough. He wanted to start interacting with more experts who were actually worth something, but the second island wasn't the place for that.

He could wait to start getting friendly with his fellow Nonexistence users until they became rational people worth maintaining contact with.

On the second island, they were either absorbed in work, absorbed in depression, or absorbed in malice.

Really, was there a point in staying for longer?

Even the enemies he expected to face became a nonissue with the forest's aid. 'It was a good time.'

Regardless, just like the first island, the second island taught him something that made him far more familiar with the concept.

As he felt the pull of the next island calling to him, he looked at the forest one last time and smiled.

'This is my doing.'

The current appearance of the forest, grand and domineering, was entirely his doing.

He couldn't help but be proud of his accomplishments.

With that pride leading the way, Damien approached the shore of the second island and took a step.

The concept of distance once again disappeared.

On this occasion, the next island didn't easily approach. It scanned him and deemed him worthy of crossing before it allowed him to make the trek onto its surface.

He had the proper qualifications. In a sense, he'd outdone the people who built even the most intricate castles.

After all, the mechanical components inside of the turtle giant's shell were not just for show.

They allowed the turtle itself to support an ecosystem.

Through its legs, it could absorb nutrients and energy from the land around it. With those mechanisms working their magic, those nutrients and energy could supply the beings living on its shell with ample sustenance to stay alive and thrive.

It was an isolated ecosystem, a mechanical monster, a weapon of mass destruction, and a bastion of absolute protection.

On top of all of that, it could move and had sentience!

How could any mere castle compare to it?

Damien made an achievement that surpassed anything done on the second island since its inception, and for that, he was properly rewarded.

The smile remained on his face as he left the lands of the second island and stepped upon the third.

From behind, several people who noticed his movements watched.

All they saw was the silhouette of a young man with black clothing and hair disappearing from sight.

That was the only hint they received about who the owner of that mysterious symbol was.

Perhaps they planned to act up now that he was gone. Maybe they believed that Death's Hold would return to its prior state without him.

It would be fun to see their reactions when they learned otherwise.

Unfortunately, Damien wouldn't be able to see it.

He was already busy on the third island, after all.

Because the instant he landed, he found himself being attacked.

'Just as I thought...' he said to himself as he set a domain of his own.

'...it won't be so peaceful from now on.'

The "beginner" period was over.

Now, Damien was also considered an experienced member of this land.

And, according to the rules of the third island's trial...

...he would be fighting other experts for the foreseeable future.

It was definitely bound to be more interesting than anything that happened thus far.

Chapter 1798 Third Island [1]

When Damien's foot made contact with the third island, he immediately felt his physical strength get suppressed.

He definitely had the right to assume that it was just a part of the island's mechanics, but what kind of idiot would follow a thought like that?

Without hesitation, he put up a domain like the ones he'd seen from others. His physical strength didn't rise back to its original level, but it definitely increased to an extent.

With his barrier and the enemy's colliding, the level at which they matched was decided as the middle ground between them.

That made Damien curious about who exactly he was fighting.

Nothing else changed other than physical strength, after all. That could only mean that they were already equal in most aspects.

Damien looked around, trying to find the person who enacted the domain. They couldn't be far.

The battles here were like duels. Opponents would stand before each other and fight while showing all their cards. They wouldn't hide away and sneak attack because it was pointless in a realm like this one.

Anyway, if the enemy wanted to sneak attack, they would have never placed their domain in the first place. Domains were practically considered duel invitations. Strangely, the person didn't immediately appear. Their domain was likely set to automatically activate when a new person entered the island. Damien was forced to wait several seconds before an individual with the same aura signature arrived in front of him.

"You are a patient newcomer, aren't you?"

Damien raised an eyebrow.

After seeing only old men for so long, it was definitely pleasing to hear a woman's voice. She was beautiful as well. Her young appearance meant that she was an incredible genius in her own realm.

Still, it wasn't as if Damien was fazed. These things merely had to be acknowledged because her beauty was definitely a representation of her strength.

By the looks of it, this wouldn't be an easy battle.

"I've been waiting to fight for a while now, " Damien admitted as he laid eyes on her.

She didn't take that long to arrive, but she was correct in assuming that he could have fled if he wanted to.

Her physical strength rose noticeably when he placed his barrier. Judging by that and ascertaining what his physical strength was when it wasn't suppressed, she could easily tell that Damien had the means to escape.

He was clearly itching for battle. His words were unnecessary for anything other than continuing the conversation.

The woman looked him up and down, taking note of the same qualities he saw in her.

A young and handsome appearance that contradicted what most of the population had, and the desire for growth that many lost by the time they arrived on this island.

The main purpose of ninety percent of people at this point was escaping. They were already content with the power they had.

Nevertheless, Damien was correct about the fact that she'd set up this barrier to catch new people. The few seconds before she arrived were to give them a chance to leave if they weren't confident in their skills.

But, even if they knew they would lose the fight, running was the wrong option.

"Newcomer, before we fight, I will tell you what the goal of this island is."

Was it courtesy? Damien didn't know her intentions, but he could fact-check her words later. He opened his ears curiously. The woman held up her hand and manifested a golden shield emblem with a crest-like pattern on it.

"Your peaceful days are over," she started.

"Unlike the first or second islands, this place is filled with brutal competition. To put it simply, we are in a battle circuit."

The woman held up her hand and manifested a golden shield emblem with a crest-like pattern on it.

"If you look within you, you will find something similar. Each and every one of us has a crest, however..."

The woman watched as Damien held his hand up and summoned an empty, bronze shield emblem.

"...it always starts from zero. As you fight on this island and win against other denizens, your emblem will continue to grow. Once you have reached the platinum shield, you can challenge an Area Lord for their title."

The structure of the challenge was not difficult to grasp.

"If you defeat an Area Lord, you can choose to either remain on the island for longer and gain more rewards as the new Lord of that region. Otherwise, you may leave from there and continue your journey. While it seems like a better idea to do the latter, most people who defeat the Area Lords don't choose that path. They remain on the island for a very long time before leaving."

"Why?" Damien asked.

"Well..." the woman smiled.

"That's for you to find out if you ever reach that point."

Damien nodded.

She already said enough. It was useless to even tell him about Area Lords at this point in time, but he was grateful that she did.

Anyway, if she was telling the truth, he could thank her later.

"More importantly, isn't it time for us to fight?"

He didn't know why she was targeting newcomers. She either wanted to use them to build up her shield emblem or teach them the ways of the island before they went deeper into its lands.

Her intentions, whether selfish or selfless, were unimportant to Damien.

Since she presented herself as target practice, he wanted to use her as target practice.

It had been a long time since he started preparing to fight with Nonexistence, but other than a few spars with the beasts in Death's Hold, he actually wasn't able to do much.

'The Lords of the second island were a disappointment.'

He glanced at the woman, who smiled at him and took a fighting stance.

'I hope the people of this land are different.'

He did the same.

These stances meant nothing. They were not going to move as they fought, so it was pointless to take any kind of stance.

However, for the sake of creating a sense of familiarity with the battle style by mimicking actions taken in a normal fight, they were able to produce more power.

The environment and feeling mattered a lot in a battle like this, after all.

Damien closed his eyes. He put himself into a mindset where the effects of the battle could be visualized.

And, without any more hesitation, he made the first move.

He learned many things from the Lords who fought against Death's Hold. The most common strategy was to affect the opponent's mind and stagger them before using more material attacks to finish them off.

Damien's first move was also of the same branch of thinking.

'Go.'

He sent his energy into the world and it instantly brought back results.

His decision was not to start by attacking.

Instead...

Once again, he banished ignorance from his mind. At the same time, he enacted a skill that aimed to banish "information" from the mind of his opponent.

Regardless of their equal states on the battlefield, she had more experience than him.

That had to change.

He had to be the one in control.

However, while he was able to give himself the information he desired...

...it wasn't so easy to take things away from an experienced fighter like that woman.

He was soon to find out that he was still in over his head.

But, wasn't that always the case?

Wasn't he always fighting enemies who were logically impossible for him to face?

This was just one of many battles, and Damien planned to treat it exactly as such.

And in classic Damien fashion, he would find a way to win.

This was his entrance into the third island's rankings.

He couldn't just lose and run away, could he?

Chapter 1799 Third Island [2]

The woman wasn't going to allow Damien to easily put her at a disadvantage.

When he banished "information" from her, she combatted it with her own energy to negate the effect.

Nonexistence was powerful enough on its own. Technically, no matter its level, if it was allowed to do as it pleased it could affect anyone at any level.

That was why it was important for people who wielded Nonexistence to always be prepared to counteract its effects.

It was an entirely different branch of thinking, one where not many excelled. In a battle between two practitioners of the concept, it was usually a race to see who could inflict enough damage to gain momentum to push forward and land a lethal blow.

The woman Damien faced was different. She, who went only by the name "Kura," was an incredibly defensive player.

To ensure that information wasn't removed from her mind, she had to target Damien's attack itself.

She found its energy in the air and read the intent Damien infused into it. In the split second before it struck, she recreated the exact same energy form, reversed it, and sent it into Damien's energy to dispel his skill.

The instant her energy was released, she was confident that his wouldn't reach her. As such, she immediately began working on a counterattack.

From what she could see, the man she was currently facing was far more skilled than the average practitioner who came from the second island.

Most people thought they would be skilled enough after spending many years there, so they left for the third island before they were truly prepared.

Only after fighting their first fight and losing would they realize how weak they were. By that point, it was already too late.

The third island really was a place of constant competition.

Kura stayed near the beginning so that she could teach these lessons to newcomers. She wasn't some kind of benevolent saint. She just wanted to make stronger people so she would have stronger opponents to face in the future.

Any individual they met would likely challenge them to a duel. If those losses added up, then the situation would turn extremely dire.

There were consequences to losing, just as there were benefits to winning.

Kura stayed near the beginning so that she could teach these lessons to newcomers. She wasn't some kind of benevolent saint. She just wanted to make stronger people so she would have stronger opponents to face in the future.

As someone near the end of the gold level, it was difficult to find people who could actually help her promote herself further.

If she kept working on the shore like this, strong people would eventually appear, right? Then, she could defeat them and finally challenge an Area Lord for their seat.

Now that she looked at him, Kura didn't think Damien needed the kind of training she was providing. Still, she wasn't remiss about fighting him.

He aimed for the mind, but she was more focused on the physical body. The intent was the same. She wanted to disrupt him so that he couldn't retaliate when she really pulled out a fatal move.

However, she chose the wrong opponent.

Damien's eyes narrowed when he saw his attack falter. 'It won't be that easy, huh.'

When the woman said that platinum was the highest rank and then showed her gold badge, Damien already knew he was fighting an uphill battle.

Nevertheless, even the beasts of Death's Hold could never directly disperse his attacks. Their strategy was to offset his energy with an even stronger concept so that it wouldn't reach them.

Seeing how Kura moved definitely gave him some insight, but his strategy never changed.

'I have to see how effective the things I've learned until now are, even if I lose.'

He noticed the incoming negation, but he ignored it.

'Physical targeting.'

He didn't care if his physical body was ruined. Physical pain didn't matter to him anymore, so it didn't mean anything.

Rather than attempting to mindlessly combat it, wasn't it better for him to attack? It was like two spiders weaving webs and fighting over territory. Damien weaved a web filled with mental attacks.

He negated confidence. He negated spirit. He negated prowess, and he negated experience.

He weaved a web that, if successful, would rid Kura of everything that made her a good fighter.

At the same time, he was struck with the web she weaved.

Pestilence, famine, and death became entangled in his body. Most importantly, there was a feeling as if the immortality Damien worked so hard to achieve was gone entirely.

'It's an illusion.'

No matter what she did, she couldn't negate his immortality.

Perhaps she could get rid of it in a certain sense, but as long as they were in the Land of Nothingness, the only thing capable of granting True Death was the realm itself.

Damien's body took on a sickly form. His muscles drained and his bones became fragile. It looked like it took him a great deal of effort to even remain standing.

However, his mind was as sharp as ever.

Despite being the one attacking more, Kura was the one with gritted teeth and a serious expression.

'Seriously, what is this guy?!'

How was he able to weave complex webs already?

In this realm, there wasn't such a thing as someone willing to teach others. Even if they did something similar, it was only out of greed.

How was Damien able to figure out how to properly wield Nonexistence without someone guiding him?

'How much did he fight on the second island?'

From what Kura remembered, it wasn't a place where battles were frequent. It shouldn't have allowed him to properly affect her mind.

Her confidence was wavering. The experience she had built up was still at her command, but the spirit and vigor of a combatant had disappeared from her body entirely.

Obviously, if Kura tried hard enough, she could bring them back.

The problem was...

'...I don't have any time!'

If she stopped defending, she'd be in serious trouble.

She looked at the battlefield between them. In the invisible field, countless spiderwebs spread all throughout. Each strand was filled with malicious intent either left by her or her opponent.

If either of them made a misstep, it would be difficult for them to recover.

After all, Damien wasn't in the best state either.

Kura was losing fighting ability. He was not. That was his advantage.

However, Kura had not taken any real damage yet. He had. That was her advantage.

He could be as battle-ready as he wanted, but unless he was able to defeat her first, he would die.

It was the consequence of taking her attacks in order to counterattack. 'Next time, I should play defensively as well.'

In this battle, it was too late for something like that.

Damien's eyes sharpened as he stared at her.

'Either I defeat her within the next minute or so, or I experience my first death in this realm.'

The stakes were already high.

But that was the exact kind of environment where Damien thrived. He had to suppress the grin that was trying to rise on his face as he attacked again.

Reflected in his eyes were the same spiderwebs that Kura saw. Only, there was a pattern in his vision that she'd failed to realize.

'It's not much, but it's definitely enough to be called a fatal blow.'

All he needed was a single opportunity.

If he could create it...

...then in his first few minutes on this island, he would defeat a gold-badged practitioner.

Exciting, right?

Chapter 1800 Third Island [3]

Kura had been frequently dispersing Damien's attacks.

Her unique talent to read another individual's energy and recreate its internal structure made her an obvious contender for the best in her class.

If attacks couldn't reach her, then wasn't it obvious that she won every battle she partook in?

Especially when people were conservative with information and unfriendly, it was easy for her to catch others by surprise and defeat them before they could get an idea of what she was actually doing.

Damien had a better connection to Nonexistence than most of those on the third island because of the events at Death's Hold. His innate perception ability was also marvelous. It was the talent that shined from when he was a teenager to now.

He saw exactly how she maneuvered her energy to mimic his. In his eyes, the interaction between the two invisible forces was clear as day.

It was like two sets of molecules meeting and binding. Each element found something perfect to bond to, and when they combined, they turned into the same atmosphere that populated the entirety of this realm.

It was extremely difficult to pull off a stunt like that unless one had practiced for an incredible amount of time.

Still, there was a flaw.

Damien attacked and attacked and attacked. Kura was forced to continuously disperse his attacks while also forming her own, which allowed certain pieces of the webs to make it past her defenses.

She was slowly being whittled away, but that wasn't the important part.

Kura was forced to focus on her side of the battlefield. She couldn't spend too much time looking beyond at where Damien stood.

That was exactly when she exposed her weakness.

Being forced to use the extent of her defensive power, Kura left an opening for Damien to manipulate the battlefield to his liking.

There was a pattern within his attacks. A constellation-like line in the webs that led straight to his opponent.

It was a surefire killshot, and Kura had no idea that it was present at all.

"Haa...haa..."

Damien was huffing and puffing already.

'I can feel my life force fading. It's troublesome.'

He didn't have any fear of his missing immortality. Knowing that he would live no matter what gave him the same kind of confidence as his usual immortality even if it was different.

Still, Damien didn't know what happened to the people who died here. He was aware that they'd come back, but was there any negative impact? What if his journey was inhibited by a single death?

He didn't want to risk it. Feeling the mortality clutching at his life, he frowned and decided to enact his hidden card as soon as possible.

Damien was definitely a lot more serious than he was when the fight first started, but he wasn't the only one.

Kura's gritted teeth were enough of a sign on their own even if one couldn't see the beads of sweat dripping down her face.

'How is he fine?'

What particularly set Damien apart from others and allowed him to set up so much was his ability to attack with the same ferocity even while being inflicted with every possible human sickness or injury possible at the same time.

Nobody else could withstand it enough to maintain their efficacy in battle. That single fact was the main reason why Kura was able to acquire victory after victory despite being more of a defensive individual than an attacker.

How much pain did Damien have to endure for him to treat his dying body as nothing but a slight hindrance?

Even dying wasn't enough to create a fortitude like that.

This was the one place where it was possible to say that. Every single person here had died at least a few times.

Was it because Damien's soul was almost torn to shreds by the Wheel of Samsara?

Or was it because the Void prepared him for this?

Pain was too important to Damien's journey. Sure, it had been a long time since he'd really felt it, but did that matter?

The body he forged through pain that no other had experienced was aiding him even at this step.

It was an unexpected variable to his opponent.

The fight only lasted for ten minutes until now, but it was more than enough time for the two to inflict serious damage on each other.

Damien was heaving. His body was giving up on him too fast.

However, Kura wasn't in a better state.

'Did I make a mistake this time?'

It had been decades since her last loss. Was this the day when her record was ruined?

These thoughts would have never existed in her head if it weren't for Damien, but that didn't make them any less impactful.

That was the problem with pessimistic thinking.

If it got bad enough, it could turn anyone into a self-fulfilling prophecy. On a subconscious level, they would start to think of their pessimism as realism and fact. When that happened, everything else was a bygone conclusion.

Kura's thoughts went on a downward spiral, placing her in that exact situation.

Who was Damien to ignore this blessing of an opportunity?

The instant he saw her eyes fall, he pushed his hand out.

It was a weak motion. Damien looked like a poorly aged old man at this point, so when he pushed his frail arm into the air, it looked like a pathetic effort.

Of course, that was not the case.

From the tip of his finger, a drop of Nonexistence entered the mass of webs in front of him.

It went from point to point, illuminating the stars in the constellation Damien created.

Kura's eyes widened.

The second she saw the light, everything changed.

'Tch!'

She tried to read the attack. Her eyes moved to the nearest light. The moment she saw it clearly, she realized that it was already too late to disperse it.

Her only option was to defend with concepts the same way others did.

She had to create a web just as complex as the one Damien made.

However, she didn't have nearly enough time.

If she had seen this trap long ago, the situation would have been very different. It was unquestionable that Damien would have been the one to lose.

He was the one who created a situation where that was not the case.

And he was not going to leave it to rot.

The light reached Kura before she could do anything.

Sixteen stars created a beautifully patterned constellation that ended in her head.

The light shot through her skull, and Kura's eyes rolled back into her head.

With a single attack, Damien destroyed her mind. When her mind could no longer bear the burden, the energy switched to her body.

Kura's body began to fade. As if she was turning into ash and floating away in the wind, her skin and bones blackened and flaked off.

Her eyes widened. She wasn't able to look at Damien in her current state, but she grinned.

"Damn."

She spoke her final words.

"This really sucks."

Kura disappeared from the world, fated to return at a later time.

Damien felt a change in his body as his shield medallion changed.

He looked at it and then back at where Kura once stood as he withdrew his domain.

Damien felt a change in his body as his shield medallion changed.

He looked at it and then back at where Kura once stood as he withdrew his domain.

'For some reason...' he thought to himself.

'...I feel like this isn't the last time we'll see each other.'

Damien had attained victory in his very first real battle in the Land of Nothingness.

But he knew that this was only one of many.

With a little more confidence in his techniques and many thoughts on how to improve, Damien left the shore for the first time.

Now, he could finally see what the third island had in store for him.