

# Void 641

## Chapter 641 Death Emperor Star [1]

The next two months passed without a hitch. Damien spent his time binding uninhabitable worlds, conversing with Zara, and fighting the various space beasts that attacked him.

His route was a relatively safe one. He mostly traveled around the edges of the Divine Realm, only moving inward a few times either for his own benefit or for the convenience of his route.

It was only due to this that Damien didn't encounter any extremely powerful existences or major worlds. The Divine Realm was structured like a grand kingdom with the strongest powers in the middle and weaker powers in the outskirts. In the center of the Divine Realm was the floating castle city, Luxurion, visible from any corner of the Divine Realm. The only outliers to this structure were major sects that took protector roles, shielding the Divine Realm's borders.

Death Emperor Star, however, was different. While it was located in the Divine Realm, its entire presence was a mystery. Accompanying this mystery was the fact that Death Emperor Star had some sort of connection to the Abyss that had yet to be uncovered to this day.

Its location was in the middle of nowhere. It was quite literally the most isolated location in the entire Divine Realm, with the closest inhabitable worlds and influences present several millions of kilometers away. Reaching Death Emperor Star from these locations required the use of a teleportation array.

Damien stood in a world called Aroath. This world was ruled by a subdivision of Blood Asura Holy Land, one of the universe's Demigod influences.

Blood Asura Holy Land was one of many peak influences that stationed sub-divisions on these worlds. Through them, individuals from their sects could freely arrive at Death Emperor Star with ease. While many of them didn't actually gain entrance into the world, it was far easier for them to try.

Nevertheless, there wasn't a particular reason Damien chose this star. When he arrived in the area, it was merely the closest one.

His steps took him through a bustling city. The sight of mortals going about their day-to-day lives was something Damien hadn't seen in a very long time. He stopped by a nearby street stand and bought a pastry, slowly savoring it as he walked to his destination.

The portal center was the most inaccessible place in the entire world. To enter, one either needed a certain level of status within the Blood Asura Holy Land or an invitation to Death Emperor Star.

This was mainly to prevent random challengers from attempting to enter Death Emperor Star. Not only would they waste the presiding experts' time, but they would also risk killing themselves.

As for external threats...it was a joke to think anyone or anything could force their way into Death Emperor Star. Many practitioners, even Demigods, unsuccessfully attempted to do so in the past. Death Emperor Star seemed to be protected by the universe itself.

Damien arrived at the portal center with only a few minutes of walking. He entered the building while finishing off his pastry and walked over to an attendant.

"Hello. I would like to enter Death Emperor Star."

The male attendant looked him up and down suspiciously. "Not just anyone can enter Death Emperor Star. If you have the necessary qualifications, please provide them and I will grant passage. If not, I will have the guards escort you out."

Two burly men around the middle stages of 4th class appeared out of thin air. They stared down at Damien intimidatingly as if daring him to mess around.

Damien shook his head wryly. For them to be so blunt, this portal center must've received plenty of opportunists in the past. As someone who'd worked a service job in the past, he really couldn't complain about their attitude.

Without a word, he took out one of the jade slips Atticus left for him. This was precisely the invitation he needed.

The attendant read over the jade slip's contents with an increasingly astonished look on his face.

"This...this...a real invitation...? From...the Holy Son of Fallen Star Holy Land himself?!"

The attendant's body shook. Thankfully, while he'd been rude in his tone, he hadn't demeaned Damien at all.

"S-sir, right this way. I shall have them open a portal for you as soon as possible."

Damien nodded in affirmation. "Is it rare to see people with invitations around here?"

The attendant tilted his head curiously. "Not particularly. All of the Death Emperor Star candidates are invitations. Those from our sect can use the portal without an invitation, but 99% of them return empty-handed. It's basically a mechanism in place for the sect's greatest geniuses. Other than that, it is merely a status move."

He gave Damien as much information as possible without giving away anything secretive. While it was true that every Death Emperor Star candidate was an invitation, they still had different classes amongst themselves.

Death Emperor Star had more recruiters than one could imagine. Their entire goal was to train the universe's young elites into heroes who could fight for its survival. Naturally they wouldn't allow a genius to go unattended merely because nobody could recognize their talent.

Each and every recruiter was an individual with amazing vision and outstanding character. However, their strengths and statuses still differed.

For instance, a normal recruiter would've at most reached the 1000s or 10000s on the Dimensional Leaderboard in their prime. These people were geniuses in their own right, but their names weren't known at all.

Then there were assorted elders with eccentric personalities who liked to wander the universe and pick up talented seedlings. They had much more value than normal recruiters, but their personalities made it so their judgement was occasionally questionable.

While there were various other breeds of recruiters, the rarest were those peak geniuses of Death Emperor Star, the Paragons.

There weren't many Paragons to begin with, around 20, and of them, only a few were willing to be recruiters.

Getting a recommendation from them was a true fear of wonder.

And among these Paragons was none other than Atticus Flamesworth.

Just his name alone was enough to give Damien considerable standing amongst those in the outside world. If Damien wanted, he could act however he pleased on this star and get away with it, regardless of what he did.

But Damien didn't take this borrowed power to heart. After all, it was only useful in the outside world. The second he crossed through that portal...

Everything became meaningless except strength.

Voom!

A fluctuation of spatial power spread from further inside the portal center. Feeling it, the attendant stood up and bowed.

"Sir, your portal has been prepared. Please maintain caution while traveling through the spatial tunnel, as the space around Death Emperor Star is extremely chaotic. When you reach, keep your senses heightened at all times. Of those I've seen enter Death Emperor Star...rarely any come back."

Damien stood up and smiled. "Thank you for the warning. I'll be sure to not drop my guard. And don't worry. I'll come see you in a few years so you can add one more to your list of success stories."

The attendant smiled slightly, never releasing his bow. As he remained in the same position, Damien walked over to the portal. He gazed at it for a few seconds to admire its complexity, and then, he stepped through without an ounce of hesitation.

In the portal center, the male attendant's smile slowly faded. His indifferent eyes glanced at the two guards.

"Go inform his highness. Holy Son Atticus' recommendation has arrived."

Chapter 642 Death Emperor Star [2]

What Damien knew of Death Emperor Star came straight from Atticus. While he didn't know how accurate this information truly was, he at least knew that it should be mostly true.

Now that he'd stepped through the portal, he'd finally arrived in this so-called hellish academy. But from the information Atticus provided, it was anything but.

There were two different types of people in Hidden Death Valley: geniuses and people who thought themselves geniuses.

For the former category, Death Emperor Star was a perfect training ground and a place where they could test their limits. But for the latter, it was a true hell.

Only, one wouldn't know which category they fit into until they underwent Death Emperor Star's trials.

As for those trials, they were actually natural phenomena. Death Emperor Star itself was a massive death zone. Every single piece of its area, regardless of environment or appearance, was a death trap. The "trials" people underwent usually consisted of them surviving these death zones and training within.

But of course, Hidden Death Valley wouldn't be called an academy if it only housed geniuses who trained on Death Emperor Star. No, Hidden Death Valley was a completely different monster.

Hidden Death Valley was home to a wide range of courses detailing a variety of subjects. From basic mana application to differences in mana utilization techniques to even specialized courses based on elemental affinity and one's chosen Class. When it came to knowledge, this academy was truly equipped.

However, this knowledge had to be earned. Every course, depending on its complexity, cost a certain number of contribution points to attend. While the ways to earn contribution points were just as varied as the course list, there were a few surefire ways that were most commonly used.

For instance, Hidden Death Valley had its own events and challenges similar to the Dimensional Leaderboard's Challenge Gates. Placing in any of these events would award one contribution points.

There were also mandatory courses that every genius had to take if they wanted to remain in Hidden Death Valley. These courses were all packed into a single day every week so that the geniuses would have more free time to train.

Still, they were imperative courses. These mandatory sessions were precisely where Hidden Death Valley's military influence shone through. That single day every week was a greater hell to most than even Death Emperor Star's death zones.

Nevertheless, for every hell Death Emperor Star possessed, there was an equal amount of heaven. With heavenly materials, powerful artifacts, and ancient legacies, Death Emperor Star was a place where all these one in one million lucky chances congregated. As long as one had the ability, they were guaranteed success.

Not to mention, Hidden Death Valley itself was home to multiple Demigods and a plethora of 4th class beings. If one was able to prove themselves, they could even earn the teachings of these magisterial individuals!

Therefore, not a single person had thoughts of quitting despite their complaints. They trained endlessly for the sake of their goals.



All of the effort these geniuses spent day by day in Hidden Death Valley culminated into an assessment that took place every year. The assessment was never the same so Damien didn't have any surety about its contents, but from what he could tell, it wasn't a joke.

If one failed this assessment, they'd likely die. If they didn't die, they'd be expelled from Hidden Death Valley. It was the most cutthroat time of every year.

'The next assessment is in 8 months. With my current strength plus the improvements I make in that time...regardless of the exam's contents, I believe I can pass.'

Damien went over the information one more time as he traveled through the spatial tunnel. It was truly as chaotic as the attendant made it seem, with spatial storms and turbulence being extremely common. Still, his abilities allowed him to stay stable during his travel.

The information Atticus provided didn't stop at general knowledge. Damien was given an insight into the various influences within Hidden Death Valley itself and the people in those influences. Particularly, it clearly delineated who to stay away from.

Blood Asura Holy Land was among these names.

'Power struggles are unavoidable anywhere, huh. The elders have factions, the students have factions, the students within the elders' factions have sub-factions...it's a whole mess. Then again, I guess it's not surprising considering the nature of this place.'

Death Emperor Star's lucky chances were all-inclusive. The weakest students and strongest Demigods alike could venture into the vast deadly world and search for ways to gain more power. It was natural

for people to group up and wish for more control in this type of environment. If one person could monopolize all of the world's resources...

While it was true that the academy existed for the Grand Heavens Boundary's sake, practitioners were a greedy bunch. Even while being altruistic they still sought benefits.

Damien shook his head and put away the jade slips. When it came to political matters, he would never interfere. His thoughts on factions were simple: if they could offer him something good enough, he didn't mind joining. However, he would never become someone's dog and he would never allow someone to limit his freedom. Anyone who touched his bottom line...

His body finally exited the spatial tunnel. He found himself surrounded by darkness. This was empty space. There were no worlds close enough to shine light this close. The only stars Damien could see were extremely far away and dull.

He turned around, his gaze focusing on the world before him.

It was so black it almost blended in with deep space. However, an ash-grey color tinged its darkness, giving it a much more ominous feeling.

This was Death Emperor Star. It was the most massive world Damien had seen to date. And unlike other worlds, this one had aura like a living being.

Saying it was a true death zone wasn't a lie. So many had died on its surface, so many had grown and evolved. The culmination of their legacies caused the world's atmosphere to be stained.

It emanated an aura it gained from those who triumphed.

And it emanated a killing intent it gained from those who perished.

This was Death Emperor Star, Damien's final destination. This was the place where he'd finally get his true start in the Divine Realm.

But first, he has to gain entry.

His body shot through space like a comet, barreling towards the planet. When he got within reach of its atmosphere, a deathly black fog shot up and enveloped him within.

"Disperse!"

Space stretched out infinitely around Damien's body. Every since centimeter suddenly became extraneously distant. Damien used this application of space's "distance" concept to completely separate himself from the fog and continue his descent.

But this was only the beginning. Before he even exited the fog, he heard the terrifying screeches of a flock of aerial beasts. They were similar in form to phoenixes, but their feathers were metallic and their affinity was completely aligned to destruction.

SKREEE!

The beast at the lead of the flock let out a piercing shriek. The flock shot through Death Emperor Star's atmosphere and arrived in front of Damien. Their metallic feathers acted as thousands of tiny blades that slashed at his skin, their deathly mana tried to corrode him from both within and without.

Facing this barrage, Damien stayed entirely calm. His mouth moved, forming two words.

"Dimension Shift."

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"Dimension Shift."

Space around Damien solidified and shifted. A pocket dimension layered into real space and somewhat merged with it. Then, with utter precision, Damien used the pocket dimension as a medium to split the true dimension in two and shift it. It was like a cube of ice that was cut in half. The upper portion of space seemingly slid apart from the bottom, shifting entirely into a different dimension.

Naturally, the metal-feathered aerial beasts weren't excluded from this. Their bodies split along with space, dissected at a molecular level. Even after Damien's attack dissipated, their cleaved bodies didn't die. It took a few seconds before blood began to color space and the light faded from their eyes.

Damien paid no mind to the perished beasts, continuing his descent. Within seconds, he burst through Death Emperor Star's atmosphere.

Here, he faced his next challenge. To be specific, it was the atmosphere itself. Just as he'd seen before, the amount of death that'd polluted this star fundamentally changed its properties. The air was almost deadly with the amount of death energy ambiently flowing. Aside from that, a thick aura suppression and killing intent would continuously bear down on everyone within its reach, adding a layer of mental and physical strain to each and every trial that took place.

This atmosphere hit Damien the second it could reach him. His falling speed multiplied several times due to the pressure. The killing intent tried to invade his mind, but was unable to do so.

'Superhero landing time...!' Damien thought to himself.

He was already gaining insane momentum in the air. His body almost caught fire due to friction before Damien used vector control to stop it.

But this speed wasn't nearly enough. While most people would've desperately tried to slow themselves down, Damien controlled gravity to increase his momentum even further!

Now he was experiencing a threefold pulling force towards the ground. His body was faster than any meteor, traveling tens of thousands of kilometers in an instant and arriving before the ground!

'Bang.'

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

His landing wasn't graceful. The second his body touched ground, the earth collapsed. Rumbling as if a terrifying earthquake occurred, the earth imploded and caved in, creating a crater tens of kilometers in diameter.

Its depth, however, was another story. Death Emperor Star wasn't famed for no reason. Damien's extreme momentum was powerful, but it couldn't penetrate far into this world's surface. He was only around 500 meters deep in the earth.

'Yeah, I can see why people don't do that more often. It hurts like a bitch.' Damien thought as he crawled out of the crater.

His legs both broke upon impact, so he had to make do with what he had while they healed.

Nevertheless, the healing process was rapid. By the time he left the crater, he was already on two legs.

At this time, there was a reaction from his subspace. One of the information jade slips flowed with a pale blue light as the information on it began to morph.

When Damien took it out to observe, he realized that the previous writings had been entirely erased. What remained was a small map.

It showed the area around Damien with some slight detail and marked a path that lead to Hidden Death Valley. The areas outside this path's radius were blacked out and unavailable to him.

'I see, so I first have to reach the academy. That's the entrance exam.'

Everyone always said that luck was also a part of one's skill set. Apparently, Hidden Death Valley also believed in this fact.

When barreling through Death Emperor Star's atmosphere, there was no way of telling where one would land. The air was hazy with black fog, making visibility extremely low. Aside from that, the mysterious forces in the atmosphere would veer one off course when they flew, altering their landing area.

For instance, Damien's original trajectory would've put him only around 10 kilometers away from Hidden Death Valley. However, he was currently more than 10,000 kilometers away.

Still, what was a challenge wasn't necessarily the same for him. While Death Emperor Star indeed had its own spatial suppression that constantly tried to limit him, he was better than that by now.

Ambient spatial suppression couldn't do anything to him at this level.

His awareness spread to its limit. At its far reaches, he could barely make out the outline of what he assumed to be Hidden Death Valley. To be cautious, he teleported 10 kilometers away from that area to observe first.

As the name suggested, it was a valley between two mountains, but it expanded downward like a trench. The only thing Damien could see was the shadowy blackness that filled the empty space of that valley.

'According to the map, this should be the place. So do I just...jump?'

Damien walked to the precipice of the abyssal trench and stared into its depths. Without hesitation, he lifted his foot off the ground and prepared to jump in.

"Woah!"

A sudden exclamation stopped him from continuing. When Damien turned around, he saw a burly man standing there. His build was massive, his body around 10 feet tall and built like heavy-duty machinery. He had a rough beard growing on his face that made him look middle-aged, but his eyes shone with the brightness of youth.

"Brother, you're just jumping in? You've got bigger balls than me!" He said with a laugh.

Damien quirked his brow. "You are?"

"Hm? Ah, my name is Lonzo Barius! I've come to enter Hidden Death Valley!"



"Mm, I'm Damien Void. Anyway, while it's been a pleasure meeting you, I seem to have business down there so..."

Without finishing his sentence, Damien's body began teetering off the edge once more. But before he could fall, Lonzo ran up behind him and pulled him back.

"What are you thinking?!" He exclaimed.

"Hm? Isn't Hidden Death Valley down there?" Damien asked back.

"It...it is, but you can't just jump! You'll die if you do!"

"Then how am I supposed to get down there?"

Lonzo sighed and shook his head. "I didn't expect you to be clueless! An instructor will come receive everyone when we've all arrived and guide us down to the bottom. Otherwise, there's no way for us to get there."

Damien furrowed his brows. He looked at Lonzo and looked back at the trench. While it was true that it was deep and somewhat harrowing, he didn't think it was impossible to survive.

As long as he pulled some tricks and executed his abilities properly, there would be no harm at all.

This Lonzo was seemingly a 4th class as well, near Damien's level. Yet, he viewed this challenge as an impossible one?

Damien looked at him suspiciously. "You can't survive if you jump down there?" He asked.

Lonzo stared at him like he was an idiot. "Of course not! That fall is tens of thousands of kilometers! Besides, elements are suppressed in the air within the trench as a defense mechanism. You won't be able to aid yourself using your affinity."

Damien nodded understandingly. "I see. So your physical body isn't powerful enough to survive that fall even with the aid of mana. That's more reasonable. But that's just a you thing. Me on the other hand..."

He shook off Lonzo's hand and walked back to the edge of the cliff.

"I'm not that weak."

Damien flashed a confident smile at Lonzo and before the latter could react, he bent backwards and fell into the trench.

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Winds whipped around him as he began free-falling. As Lonzo told him earlier, he truly couldn't utilize any of his affinities while falling.

But that wasn't much of a problem. After all, aside from his powerful body, he could use attributeless mana to fortify himself.

His body remained near the trench wall as he descended, his mind focused on the moment he needed to start slowing his fall.

When he'd fallen roughly 100 meters, his arm snapped out and his hand dug into the wall. In that instant, his body jerked with momentum!

The wall couldn't handle his velocity and the grip he made shattered, but that was a given. He remained with his hand in the wall, allowing it to tear through the dirt as he descended and slow his fall.

The grating sound of his hand being torn as it broke apart the rock was gruesome. Still, his method was somewhat effective.

200 meters...400 meters...500 meters...

By the time he was a half kilometer deep in the trench, his descent slowed to a halt. He breathed out while letting his hand heal, hanging off the trench wall.

'Still no end? How deep does this go?'

Realistically, he didn't think Hidden Death Valley would be located more than a kilometer deep in the earth. However, he couldn't sense it despite his current position.

'There may be perception-blocking formations set up in the area...maybe a beguiling formation too. It would make sense considering that it's a system meant to block intruders.'

Damien furrowed his brows. He didn't think it'd be so complicated to get down to the bottom. If he knew there were multiple systems in place to prevent this type of entrance, he would've just waited with Lonzo.

But now that he was already here, he wouldn't turn back. After his hand healed from its previous damage, he let go of the wall and began dropping again.

Another 500 meters passed by rapidly with Damien still falling. By this time, he was already a kilometer deep, yet he still didn't see anything nearby.

That is, until he mysteriously felt the ground beneath his feet.

With the surrounding blackness, it was hard to distinguish between whether he was truly falling or just suspended in the air. Suddenly feeling the ground with no indication of its arrival and the disappearance of his previous momentum was more than just a little disconcerting.

"State your name and purpose or be executed."

A feminine voice rang out from behind him. When he turned around, all he saw was blackness.

'Hmm, so my senses are being limited by this formation as well. If that's the case...'

He activated the All-Seeing Eyes and quickly found a flaw in the formation. Instead of breaking it entirely, however, he merely used it as a gateway to see through to the other side.

This was an ally influence, after all. He didn't want to needlessly start trouble with the people who'd be his company for the foreseeable future.

"My name is Damien Void," he replied once he finally got visuals on the group around him. "I've come on Atticus Flamesworth's recommendation to join this academy."

The group of guards was made up of 10 men and women around the middle ranges of 4th class. The one at the head of the squad was a late-stage. When she heard his reply, her brow furrowed.

"If you're an incoming student you should be waiting for the instructor at the precipice of the trench. Why did you jump?"

"I don't know," Damien shrugged. "Someone told me I couldn't do it so I decided to see for myself."

"You have a fetish for courting death?" The woman sneered.

"If death was a woman she'd be pretty hot..."

Damien spoke without thinking.

"Pfft...!"

Damien could hear some of the guards hiding their laughter beyond the barrier. As for the woman in front, her face turned red with annoyance. Her eyes turned cold. She wasn't in the mood to play games with a cheeky intruder even if he truly was recommended to the academy by a Paragon.

"Nonsense! Show me your identification if you want entry. Since you've used Atticus Flamesworth's name, I'll have to bring an elder to verify your identity. If you aren't confident in your lies I suggest you admit it now and allow us to take you into custody."

"That's fine, go get your elder. I'll wait here." Damien said casually. He also didn't want to deal with unnecessary conflict.

The woman at the front eyed the barrier suspiciously as if she could see Damien's figure within. She sent out a messaging talisman as she did so, and roughly 5 minutes later, an old man appeared in the area.

"Sheesh, what're you calling me for? It's just a little intruder, right? Just kill him and throw his body to the Galos."

The old man crankily flew over and landed in front of the barrier. "Kid, if you want to be slick, don't use a Paragon's name. That'll only draw suspicion to you. How are you planning to infiltrate with such terrible skills?!"

"Uhh..." Damien stood speechless. He wasn't even trying to intrude. Besides, why was this old man giving intruders tips on how to sneak into the academy better?! Wasn't that counterintuitive?!

It seemed the lead guard was thinking the same thing, as she quickly slapped the old man atop the head and shut him up.

"Old Man Gao, he says he has a real recommendation. Check it for us and see if he's in the clear."

"Oh? So he's not an intruder?"

"We don't know yet."

"Then do your jobs!"

"I'm following protocol and calling you over! Do your job and stop talking nonsense, old man!"

"Haa, fine fine. I don't get why young kids these days are so motivated. Relax a little and try and enjoy life for once."

The old man glanced over at the barrier after talking. "Kid, show me some proof if you don't want to die or whatever."

Damien nodded and took out the emblem Atticus gave him, passing it through the barrier.

The old man took it and glanced over it a few times, even scanning it thoroughly with his awareness. No matter how he tried to pick fault, he couldn't deny that it was a true emblem from the Flamesworth Clan.

"Tch, and here I thought I was going to have some fun today." The old man mumbled.

"Just let him through! He's clear!"

With those words, the barrier around Damien dissipated. Finally, he could see more than just the small amount he could through the flaw.

He was currently in a space not too dissimilar from the blackness he was in previously. The only difference was that mana-powered lights were hanging from the ceiling here, granting some visibility.

"Damien Void, follow me. I'll take you to the administrations office." A nearby guard said.



Damien nodded and followed. Before he left, he glanced at the old man in the corner. He had the itch to taunt him for his attitude, but didn't let it control him.

He was learning to be civil, after all.

Nevertheless, Damien and the guard exited the black room soon after.

It was finally time for him to see Hidden Death Valley in all its glory.

Chapter 645 Eden [1]

Over a year passed since war took hold of the universe.

Over this year, many things changed. Kingdoms rose and fell, geniuses ascended to the skies, and the war became far fiercer than ever before.

Eden was a large sector, all things considered. However, in comparison to the Elven Domain, it was still smaller. After all, even as the dominant species of their sector, plant species who could reach maturity and evolve weren't extremely commonplace. It took a great deal of time and effort for most of them to even acquire movement abilities, making their combat capabilities limited.

The reason they were able to rise until they became dominant was purely due to quantity. Even beasts were far outnumbered by plants in the universe. Eden was a wildly overgrown domain where there even existed plants who grew with the starry sky as their soil and universal origin energy as their sunlight. In

this kind of environment, it wasn't strange for a large number of plant species to eventually mutate and develop into powerhouses who claimed the land.

Nevertheless, they still relied on other races to grow in the early stages of their lives. The actual combat capability of the Plant Races as a whole was made up of a small group of experts rather than a large army.

Against most internal threats of the Grand Heavens Boundary, these few experts were enough to maintain the status quo, however, everything changed when the Nox appeared.

Nox were inherently a species similar to the Plant Races. They also specialized in quantity. The key difference between them was that the Nox weren't limited in their movement capabilities.

When it came to conquest, the latter species was far more equipped.

Before aid arrived from the other 6 sectors, Eden was close to ruin. Its worlds were fine due to the abundance of plant species residing within them, but most of their domain had already been occupied by the Nox. As beings who didn't need a normally inhabitable environment to survive, they could easily claim dead and uninhabitable stars for their own campsites, putting invisible pressure on the Plant Races.

Aid arrived about 3 months after the outbreak of war. A large number of petty soldiers along with a few experts to command them arrived from everywhere. The Nox's mobility and numbers advantage was somewhat quelled through these reinforcements.

Still, it was a harrowing war. As things stood, half of Eden was corrupted by the Nox. Thousands of worlds were destroyed without remorse, hundreds of billions or even more lives taken over the course of a year.

However, maintaining the frontline and making sure it didn't get pushed past Eden was the main goal, even if Eden itself was destroyed.

"The enemy's main camp is here on Throh. There is at least one Demigod residing there, along with the main destroyer ship that they've been using to annihilate worlds rapidly. Sadly, even though we know the location, we do not have the means to attack it."

A man spoke seriously in front of a group of listeners. His job was to report the overall situation to the warfront's leaders so they could accurately judge the situation and plan around it.

A woman frowned at his words as he spoke. She had pale green skin and hair similar to drifting leaves, her status as a plant race expert evident.

"Taking the main camp would delay their progress a great deal. If they want to continue at their current pace, they'd need to bring another destroyer into the universe, which would undoubtedly take time. If we had even a single Demigod among us..."

"Stop. You already understand that Demigods cannot participate in the war. The second one of them makes a move, they'll collectively be teleported to the Ancient Battlefield until the war ends." Another man responded.

"But isn't that good for us? We need to cage their powerhouses more than they need to cage ours."

"You're wrong. It may look that way on the surface, but it's much deeper than that. Think about it: when our Demigods are taken away, do we still have the power to defeat the Nox's sheer numbers? We need to hold out for as long as we can do that the single time the Demigods can act is put to good use instead of being wasted pointlessly."

"You're right..." the woman realized, "but we still need to consider the enemy's main camp. If we can capture Throh, our supply line to the Soul World will finally be functional. This will not only increase our combat power, but also our efficiency and resources. Strategically, Throh is the most important location in Eden right now."

Those present fell into thought upon hearing her words. As she said, establishing a connection to the Soul World, the Spirit Race's domain, was their next immediate goal. The spirit race's elemental and mental magic capabilities would be more than just helpful in their current predicament. Aside from that, the Soul World was a place filled with unique resources related to mental strength. The common soldier would be able to fight with much more vigor and spirit if they could acquire such resources.

In an army where multiple forces joined together as one, establishing a proper chain of command was naturally difficult. To cope with this, a reward and punishment system was put in place to incentivize the soldiers and motivate them.

One's rank could increase through contribution even to the point of becoming a leading general. They'd also be granted plenty of resources and artifacts to help them survive and grow with haste. For the common soldier, reaching 4th class was an impossible dream.

With a method to turn the impossible into reality right in front of them, how could they resist?

But the greatest hurdle a practitioner faced as they grew stronger was comprehension. Establishing a dominion over one's element and thoroughly grasping its foundation was nigh impossible for someone without talent.

The Soul World's resources could change that. If these common practitioners could enhance their mental abilities and strictly focus on comprehension, their chances of being baptized were far greater.

The room was silent as those leaders tried to find a solution. The enemy had many camps throughout Eden, but attacking them was pointless at the current juncture. It'd only serve to exhaust their men even more.

'What can we do...?'

A woman thought to herself. She was one of Eden's natives and also one of the first people to notice the incoming war. Now that she sat here a year after its beginning, she was stumped.

The enemy was not only more powerful, but also more equipped. More than the Demigod, the destroyer ship was the problem.

The Nox Demigod wasn't allowed to participate in the war due to the restriction. However, the destroyer ship wasn't included in this restriction. The Nox had a Demigod-level force that could be used by lower existences. It was impossible to take Throh without considerable losses that they didn't have the numbers to cope with.

"...can we draw them away?" A voice rang out. Heads turned, multiple gazes landing on a girl not far away. She looked only around 10, but nobody underestimated her because of this.

"Draw them away? How so? We've already tried to lure them away with our greatest treasures and temptations but they refuse to budge. It's like they're aware of our plans."

"Well then," the girl continued, "we just have to make the bait something they can't resist."

Chapter 646 Eden[2]

The meeting continued deep into the night. The little girl's plan was taken into consideration, and after she revealed the nature of her so-called "irresistible bait," the other experts also agreed that it could work.

The plan was extremely risky, though, and if it failed Eden would rapidly hasten towards total annihilation. It was a great gamble nobody was quite willing to take.

In the end, that plan was set aside as a final resort. Before the situation became tense enough to put it in motion, Eden's forces would stick to guerrilla tactics and covert operations to lessen the Nox's influence in the sector.

War was a long and drawn-out process. Even going many months without combat wasn't strange. The mental battle, however, was constant.

And more than the Nox, the Army of Heaven, as the soldiers colloquially termed themselves, was suffering heavily. The stress and exhaustion they felt didn't translate to the Nox powerhouses who could sit back and casually sent hundreds of thousands of mindless lower beings to attack at any time.

Alleviating this invisible burden was of utmost priority. Once morale soared, their chances of victory would do the same. After all, a vigorous soldier would kill ten enemies in the same amount of time an exhausted soldier took to kill one.

Within Eden, there was a world largely hidden from the universe due to its unique spatial coordinates. The folds of space seemed to wrap around the world and camouflage it from the outside world.

In this strange world, there was a tree that took up most of the world's surface area, the earth around it was filled with foliage and flora that established itself using the tree's roots as a base.

And on this tree was a cabin. A woman sat in this cabin worriedly staring at the simple wooden table in front of her. A small "x" marked itself onto the table as she did so.

"Another one gone. With this, under half of Eden's worlds remain uncorrupted. Should I...move?"

"Don't. You know as well as I do that you can't."

A man appeared behind this woman wearing pristine white robes that contrasted his dark hair and eyes. His presence was ethereal, making one doubt whether he really existed or not.

Naturally, this man was a Demigod.

"Arturo, if it was your Demon Race in peril, would you stay still?" She asked.

"I would," Arturo replied without hesitation.

"Then you're a better person than me. I cannot allow my people to suffer like this without a chance at redemption. If I kill that Demigod, it will give them the leeway to take back our sector and win the first major battle of this war. You know how much their momentum means."

Arturo sighed despondently. "Regardless, none of us are powerful enough to disobey the universe's rulings. If you wish to potentially harm every existence in the Grand Heavens Boundary, act as you please. However, wouldn't it be better to provide minor aid so they can deal with the problem themselves? Not only will we remain safe, but your people can also further improve themselves."

The woman frowned but said nothing. Of course she'd considered this passive stance of support but she didn't know how viable it was. What did she have to offer besides combat power? Her treasures weren't helpful in the long run. Besides, one needed to at least be a 4th class being to control a Demigod rank artifact.

The exceptions to this rule were too rare to matter on such a large scale.

"What you should offer them?" Arturo repeated after hearing her doubts. He raised his brow and looked at her like she was an idiot. "What they require right now is a method to take down the destroyer ship. You're telling me that there's nothing you can offer to aid them?"

The woman looked deeply into Arturo's eyes before her own flashed with realization. She had been too focused on the Nox Demigod instead of the crux of the issue. As long as the destroyer ship lost function, the Nox would lose a great deal of their current momentum.



"If it's just a mana engineering device...it should be possible. Arturo, I thank you for your advice, but I must ask you to leave now. I have important business to take care of."

Arturo chuckled lightly. "You don't have to tell me twice. Just make sure you don't do anything stupid while I'm not here."

"Tch, as if I need your help with anything."

"Even as a Demigod you're still the same...it isn't bad asking for help every once in a while, you know."

"I'll ask for help when I need it. I asked you for help just now, didn't I?"

'I think it's more apt to say you took my unsolicited advice but...' Arturo thought internally. Naturally he wouldn't say it out loud and upset the woman.

Still, her behavior brought a smile to his face.

Reaching the Demigod level wasn't all fun and games. It wasn't just power that one could wield freely. These Demigods who chose to stay in the lower universe were always limited by numerous factors.

Ironically, the most limiting factors were manmade. The endless politics and restrictions made it tiring to even live. The only solace was that time passed extremely fast for these Demigods.

Their natural lifespan was just too long, making their perception of time distant. Arturo had seen the rise and fall of countless powers and geniuses. He'd seen betrayal and darkness enough to make one convert to the Nox's side.

Yet, this woman always remained the same. Here, secluded in her little paradise, she shone with a radiant light that cast away all the darkness around him.

Without her continued presence, Arturo knew that he might've...

Nevertheless, seeing her get up and begin to work, his figure slowly faded. Interrupting her when she was like this was asking for death.

In his mind, he had to wonder: with the ingenuity this woman showed whenever true danger appeared, could she truly help turn the tides of war without breaking the restriction?

He could only hope so. From this point on, she became Eden's most promising route of survival.

'That's a heavy burden to carry alone...I dearly hope that it isn't heavy enough to destroy you.'

With that Arturo's figure vanished. Finally, the woman turned around and looked at the spot where he used to be.

"Just wait a bit longer. When this war is over..."

We can finally have the relationship we've always wanted. She wanted to say these words, but stopped herself.

Whether they'd live through the war was still unknown.

Her attention refocused on the task at hand. In her hand, pale green mana coagulated into a ball. That ball was slowly molded into the shape of a small humanoid being. With another breath of mana, it was brought to life.

"Go," the woman said, "take this to Aaliyah and tell her it is a gift from me. It is up to her how she uses it."

Kyuu~!

The fairy chirped excitedly and took hold of the spatial ring that was handed to it. Afterwards, it left through a nearby window and flashed through space, headed to its destination.

The woman looked up at the full moon in the sky and sighed.

'Hope, huh...it'll still be a few years until its symbols can mature. Please...please try to hold out until then.'

#### Chapter 647 Hidden Death Valley [1]

Death Emperor Star in itself held a desolate atmosphere. The sky was black, the soil was black, the fog permeating the air was black; as a result of the copious amounts of death mana in this world's foundation, the entirety of its figure had been painted in its color.

When Damien teleported to Hidden Death Valley, he didn't take much time to observe the surroundings for this reason. The black plains he landed in were a dreary and repetitive atmosphere without much variation.

That didn't mean that the rest of Death Emperor Star was the same, though. The surrounding 50,000 kilometers or so were regularly maintained by Hidden Death Valley's staff and geniuses, allowing it to remain free of the rest of the world's danger.

Unlike Death Emperor Star's regular scenery, however, Hidden Death Valley was completely different. As a premier academy for the universe's peak geniuses, it naturally had to be up to par.

Damien was led by the guard to the Administrations Building nearby. Here, he showed his proof of invitation once more and received his identity token and uniform.

He'd gotten so used to wearing robes at this point that seeing pants and a shirt made him feel strange in a comfortable way.

After receiving his student materials and being assigned a private dorm, Damien was essentially given free rein to explore the campus.

And he did just that. He spent the next two days walking without pause, exploring every nook and cranny of Hidden Death Valley's main area.

It was truly a magnificent place.

The northern area was sectioned off for training areas alone. There were gravity chambers, virtual battle arenas, dungeon simulators, time dilation capsules, and many more facilities that geniuses could use to speed up their training in a more controlled environment.

The east was where all the courses were located. The entire eastern portion of Hidden Death Valley was architecturally modeled similarly to a college campus, with students walking about and attending classes to better themselves.

Naturally, both of these zones required credits to enter and use.

The western section was residential. Student housing varies depending on one's rank and contribution points. From the smallest 4 person dorms to the largest personal palaces, they all shared the west. In the same vein, there were various common areas along with entertainment and commercial districts, making the western area more of a large city than anything else.

Finally, the south. In truth, Damien was denied entrance when he tried to explore the southern area. The reason was simple: the southern area was entirely military. Once inside, one would experience a living hell of conformity and order. They'd learn to become soldiers and be trained into obedience.

Though this was a harsh way of putting it, Damien felt that it was most apt. Even if it was for the greater good, Hidden Death Valley was still training geniuses into mere hunting dogs.

The only way to escape this fate was to stand out enough to stand above it.

Nevertheless, these four districts had their own names. Arcadia in the north, Daea in the east, Star City in the west, and finally, the south's Hell Hole.

The central area was mostly empty aside from accommodations for new students. The entirety of the trench Hidden Death Valley was located in was blocked off by a ceiling many tens of kilometers high above every district except the central area.

The central area opened up to an abyss above that connected to the trench. After all, the trench itself could be used as a training mechanism if one was daring enough. Aside from that, this arrangement allowed Hidden Death Valley to funnel any intruders to a single area where they could be swiftly dealt with away from the academy's main population.

These past two days, Damien rapidly got accustomed to the academy's environment. From what he could see, most of the geniuses here were wholly focused on themselves, discarding any relationships or even conflicts that didn't directly impact their strength.

Combined with the information he gained from Atticus, Damien felt he had a generally good understanding of the academy itself. And since a genius' training regime was entirely dependent on themselves, there was no set standard for him to follow after these two days ended.

Now that he'd accustomed himself to the new environment, it was up to him to decide how to spend his time. But of course, if he wanted to train without worry, he first needed an exorbitant amount of contribution points.

'Should I check the mission board first? Or maybe I should go straight for the Mystic Tower...?'

The mission board and Mystic Tower were both located in Star City. While they were both locations where geniuses could find missions to earn contribution points, there was a fundamental difference between them. While the mission board handled tasks strictly within Hidden Death Valley, the Mystic Tower granted tasks in Death Emperor Star.

Depending on the level of danger one wanted to experience, one could choose between the two. Of course, with Damien's current situation, the Mystic Tower was his best bet.

'I have 6 months until the year-end assessment. If I want to blow my competition out of the water and gain heavy benefits, I need to put my everything into these 6 months.'

Damien immediately used a teleportation array to go to Star City. When he arrived, he made a beeline for the large cylindrical tower on the horizon. Its shape and size made it extremely obvious.

"Zara, I think you can come out now," he said suddenly when he arrived in front of the building.

"Are you sure? They didn't register me as a student so..." a reply came as Zara's figure materialized next to him.

Damien shook his head. "It's fine. In the worst-case scenario, you can still accompany me as my beast companion. Though, I prefer you join as an individual instead. That way, you can also benefit from the time we spend here."

"Mm," Zara made a sound of affirmation. She'd realized long ago that clinging to Damien wasn't the best option for either of them. If she did so, she'd never be able to match his speed of improvement.

Still, the thought of separating again when they'd just reunited recently made her downcast.

Damien smiled lightly and patted her head. "What are you thinking? Registering as an individual doesn't mean separating from me, it just means standing as your own person. Who said we can't take missions together after you've done so?"

Zara's eyes brightened immediately as he said it. While to him, there was nothing wrong with his words, it wasn't the same for her.

To stand as her own person and not as Damien's beast companion...didn't that give her a chance?

"Remember, men are fickle creatures! If you want a chance with the man you love, be bold! Stand next to him as an equal and make it impossible for him to reject you!"



Such were the words Tang Lingzi would always tell her. That woman was more excited to push her together with Damien than even she herself was.

But...that didn't mean Zara was opposed to the idea. The feelings she had for Damien weren't light. In her eyes, Damien was a childhood friend and the person she trusted most in the world.

Nevertheless, she'd never considered mating with Damien. This was mainly because he never entertained the idea in the slightest. To him, she was nothing more than a beast companion and a little sister.

Flames lit up in Zara's eyes. She didn't quite understand the human concepts of romance, but she knew that she wasn't satisfied with the current distant relationship she had with Damien. Even if there was no romance involved, she still wanted to be someone who could stand by his side as an equal, an individual.

Damien smiled when he saw her face light up, unknowing of the thoughts in her head. Beckoning her to follow, he soon entered the Mystic Tower.

Chapter 648 Hidden Death Valley [2]

The Mystic Tower had a total of 8 floors that categorized tasks from least to most difficult.

Hidden Death Valley was a place for geniuses, but not all geniuses had the same starting point or classifications. For instance, there were even kids in Hidden Death Valley who hadn't reached 16 yet.

The lowest floor's tasks were doable even by 2nd class beings. These were usually patrol tasks or cleanup tasks in the portion of Death Emperor Star that'd already been claimed by the academy.

The difficulty of tasks jumped with every floor one climbed in the Mystic Tower. By the 5th floor, tasks began appearing that even the strongest 3rd class beings couldn't face.

Damien didn't stop at the 5th floor, though. These tasks were around the level an early 4th class being could handle, but that didn't apply to him. The tasks he wanted could only be on the 6th floor.

The 7th floor was for late-stage or even peak 4th-class experts. As for the 8th floor, only extreme peak 4th-class masters and Demigods had the right to enter.

Damien wasn't curious about these floors. He was well aware that he could only flee if he encountered a late-stage 4th-class master. As for those above that level, he didn't even have to mention it. It'd be instant death.

The 6th floor alone was more than enough for his strength level. The tasks he saw weren't small, after all.

Slaying powerful demonic beasts, exploring mystical environments, capturing heavenly materials that'd been sighted, the tasks were numerous and varied, giving Damien almost too many options to choose from.

But he didn't take nearly as long as he expected to make a choice. When his eyes landed on a single task, he couldn't peel them away anymore.

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## Explore the Emperor Bone Sea

The Emperor Bone Sea has remained unexplored even with Hidden Death Valley's continued existence. Explore and map the sea to your best abilities. Contribution point rewards will vary depending on the detail and precision of the plotted map along with any other provided insights.

Base Reward: 100 contribution points per 1000 kilometers of explored area.

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Of the present tasks, this one was perhaps the vaguest. After all, there was no clear agenda in this exploration. The only requirement was to map the area as one explored.

The fact that nobody took the mission despite the presumable ease of its contents made Damien wonder about the Emperor Bone Sea's existence. If it was truly a place where mid-level 4th-class beings couldn't survive, it wouldn't be on the 6th floor of the Mystic Tower.

But at the same time, if the environment was survivable, this task wouldn't be available for Damien to choose from.

'Still, I've always wanted to explore the seas. Even before the World Awakening, we didn't know much about the seas on earth. Comparatively, the seas of Death Emperor Star have probably existed for thousands of times longer. The mysteries hidden in their depths...'

While the arrangement of planets changed as Earth integrated with the rest of the Human Domain, it was still true that earthlings knew more about space than their own oceans. The information they'd gained on celestial bodies, save for the more mystical elements like World Cores, was mostly true.

Yet, the oceans still remained a mystery.

Especially with the intrusion of mana, large bodies of water like oceans and seas weren't even explored by the strongest humans. With the brutality of the ocean's atmosphere, it was unknown if even a Demigod could survive its deepest depths.

Even Damien's bound World Cores refused to allow him to explore the ocean with his awareness using them as mediums.

But this was exactly what made Damien anticipate exploring it so much.

New civilizations completely untouched by non-aquatic life, new environments and ecosystems that functioned in a completely different manner than those on land, the thought of discovering these things made Damien's spirit of adventure light up with fervor.

After getting Zara's opinion and confirming that she didn't mind this task, he immediately accepted it.

Accepting tasks from the Mystic Tower was too easy. Damien merely had to bring the mission paper up to his identity token, thereafter having it scanned and recorded in his student log. For the next month, this mission was reserved for him. If he was unable to complete it and/or return in that time, the mission would be returned to the board.

Damien left the Mystic Tower feeling refreshed. The Mystic Tower and mission board reminded him of the half a year he spent as an adventurer on Apeiron. It was a nostalgic feeling that made him feel giddy and young.

For the rest of the day, Damien took Zara around Star City to explore its various sights and enjoyed its delicacies. They even visited a sort of virtual reality game cafe where they entered a simulation and messed around to their hearts' content.

Day turned to night, the artificial sunlight bathing Hidden Death Valley vanishing over the pseudo-horizon. When darkness overcame the area, Star City became ablaze with light.

"Wow..." Zara muttered as she watched the city glow. She'd never seen anything like it before.

Damien couldn't help but whistle as well. While he'd seen plenty of futuristic technologies in the unnamed world, that world's denizens lacked aesthetic sense. They built every building with practicality and functionality as their only thoughts.

A scene like this one, the beauty of technology, only Chongqing on Earth could compare to even a fraction of this city's magnificence.

"This isn't a moment to be wasted. Come, let's go see what the city has in store for us!" Damien exclaimed with excitement.

"Mm!" Zara hummed in agreement. She grabbed his hand and ran into the skyline, happily laughing as she enjoyed the ambiance they'd created.

The two were like children at their first amusement park. They let go of all worries, all cares about face, all responsibilities, and took just a single night to enjoy themselves to the fullest. They drank, they danced, they turned the city into their playground.

And by the time they arrived in front of Damien's dorm room, they could barely be considered sober.

"Damiennn~" Zara slurred, "I feel funny~"

She felt tingly and giddy all over. Her head was spinning, but that just made the world more fun. Whenever she had a thought, she'd find it exiting her mouth in the next second. She found it funny how little control she had over her inhibitions at the moment.

Her first time getting tipsy was an experience she wouldn't forget...at least, as long as she didn't drink until she dropped.

Damien held onto her with his arm wrapped around her shoulder, supporting her movements. Watching Zara clumsily maneuver herself, he burst out into a fit of laughter.

"Whaaat~? What's so funny? Show me, show me~!" Zara said, shaking him as she did so.

"Nothing, nothing," Damien responded while trying to hide his laughter. "You seem to be having fun tonight."

"Of course~!" Zara responded, "human drinks are...very fun...!"

Damien shook his head smilingly. He had to make a mental note to keep Zara away from alcohol. But, that could wait for a different day.

Tonight, they would do anything they wanted and celebrate the start of a new journey.

As the two moved to enter Damien's dorm room, however, a voice suddenly rang out from behind them.

"You...are you Damien Void?"

Chapter 649 Conflict [1]

"You...are you Damien Void?"

When Damien turned around, the visage of a blonde-haired man with an upturned nose was revealed to him.

"That would be me. And you are?" Damien responded curiously. There wasn't any reason for people at the academy to know his name yet, so he had to wonder who the person in front of him was.

"Hmph. I am Julius Wellspring. Though, I guess that means nothing to a back alley street thug like you." Julius responded haughtily.

"Ah? My bad, I didn't hear you. Can you repeat that for me?" Damien responded.

"Hah, you're hard of hearing too? Really, I have to wonder how far nepotism can get y—"

Bang!

A fist swiftly connected with the right side of Julius' face. With a guttural cracking sound, his body was sent flying backwards. Damien stood where Julius was previously, shaking his fist.

"Tch. Who did I piss off this time?"

A random stranger coming up to him and blatantly trying to provoke him smelled an awful lot like the plot of some pompous genius who wanted to test or make trouble for him. Naturally, Damien hadn't been in the Divine Realm long enough to make enemies like this, but he realized that there were a few other cases in which he inadvertently drew attention to himself.



Firstly, his rank on the Dimensional Leaderboard. His sudden rise would obviously cause eyes to turn towards him. However, Damien himself was still hidden. The only one who'd seen his visage was Atticus, so nobody could match his name to his face.

Still, this was likely part of the cause. The second was none other than Atticus. Since Damien entered Hidden Death Valley with Atticus' recommendation, he'd been marked as a part of Atticus' faction by others who knew of him. Enemies of Atticus or Fallen Star Holy Land would regard him as someone Atticus favored, which made him a good target to pressure to indirectly hurt Atticus.

"Haa, this is why I always stay away from politics. These assholes just entertain each other with bullshit all the time like they have nothing better to do. Seriously..."

"Y-you...! You dare attack me?!" Julius' voice boomed through the surroundings, interrupting Damien's complaints.

"Hm? Didn't you fall unconscious?"

"That is none of your concern! I am the heir to the Wellspring Family of Immortal Blood Holy Land! You'll pay for offending me!"

'So it was Immortal Blood Holy Land or at least someone related to them...I guess this is why Atticus specifically mentioned to stay away from them.' Damien thought to himself. But outwardly, he continued to taunt Julius.

As he'd just found out, the latter was an idiot! Fishing information out of him would be too easy.

"...the Wellspring Family is probably just some minor family in Immortal Blood Holy Land anyway. You give off the smell of a leashed dog."

"How dare you?!" Julius roared. While Damien wasn't exactly correct, it was true that the Wellspring Family was essentially a group of dogs.

However, the masters they served were none other than those of the Bloodlock lineage, Immortal Blood Holy Land's Lord Clan! The Immortal Blood Asura who ruled Immortal Blood Holy Land was a member of this lineage, and the rest were his descendants.

The Wellspring Family was heaven and earth compared to other dogs.

And while being someone's slave was humiliating for any genius, being a Bloodlock's slave meant there was no point in resisting this fate.

Julius in particular was a person who perfectly assimilated into his dog position.

Nevertheless, even other high families of Immortal Blood Holy Land wouldn't dare to call the Wellspring Family a group of dogs. The power they possessed couldn't be underestimated.

Now, a random hick who just joined Hidden Death Valley actually had the audacity to say those forbidden words?

Julius couldn't accept it!

"I challenge you to a duel!" He shouted.

The academy emblem on his uniform glowed with blue light. A laser-like beam of light left it and connected to the matching emblem on Damien's chest.

A holographic prompt appeared in front of his eyes.

[You have received a duel request from Rank 10,341, [Julius Wellspring]. Please choose Accept or Deny.]

[Accept]

[Deny]

Damien raised his brow. He was aware of the dueling system, but he didn't think he'd be using it so soon.

Hidden Death Valley had its own leaderboard called Heaven's List, and the positions on this leaderboard were determined through ranked duels. Any student could challenge any other whenever they wished, but the other party had the choice whether or not to accept.

Every duel that took place in this manner was ranked, and if the Heaven's List judged that the strength difference between the two fighters wasn't too vast, denying a duel request would lower one's overall average and affect their ranking.

This judgement was based on one's position in the ranking. Since Damien wasn't even on Heaven's List yet, rejecting the duel wouldn't impact him in any way.

Still, did he have any reason to do so?

"You're not even in the Top 10,000? Isn't your master underestimating me too much?" Damien taunted. He didn't hesitate to click the holographic Accept button.

The second he did, he and Julius were covered in a flash of blue light. Around them, a kilometer-wide holographic arena formed.

This holographic arena was the special technology that allowed Heaven's List to function. It was similar to the virtual battle arenas in Arcadia, except one could use their true body to fight.

Only, killing was allowed. When a genius either died or was too wounded to continue, the barrier's enchantment would activate, teleporting them out and restoring them to peak condition.

From Damien's understanding of it, the barrier worked using a combination of space and time magic, along with another force that he wasn't aware of. Regardless, it was the perfect arena for geniuses to go all out without risking any true harm or destruction.

Of course, the mental damage left by what happened in the arena would remain. While it was a haven for upright students, it was just as favorable to those cruel individuals who enjoyed toying with their prey.

Damien eyed Julius as the latter pulled out a rapier and charged it with mana. His eyes were indifferent to it all.

"Rank 10,000, you can't even touch my sleeves with that level of strength." He said.

A vicious grin spread on his face. "Then, let me leave a big gift for your master. Let's see how he reacts."

A reddish-black gleam colored Damien's eyes. And in the next instant, his body flickered out of existence.

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Outside the holographic barrier, Zara stood by herself. After Damien's interaction with Julius, she'd already used mana to sober up.

Her eyes were cold as she watched the barrier. For someone to actually dare bully Damien...

A vicious glint filled her eyes. It should've been her in the barrier. It should've been her ripping that Julius person to shreds.

She felt a brewing killing intent that she could barely suppress.

And as if fate was on her side, the barrier began to vanish soon after.

Damien and Julius rematerialized in the physical world. While Damien stood the same as he always was, Julius was already on the floor, trembling.

"Yo!" Damien said when he saw Zara. "I was thinking about torturing this guy, but it was a bit boring with his weak resistance. So I had a thought: wouldn't this be the best way to introduce you to the academy?"

"That barrier is a real treat. Besides a little emotional trauma, he really doesn't have any wounds left. It's hard to believe that he was fused to the ground a few seconds ago...anyways, since you're currently just my beast companion, it should count as a continuation of the previous challenge, so we can bypass the consecutive challenges rule. Do you want to have a go at him?"

Zara didn't hesitate for even a single second. Nodding her head eagerly, she copied what Julius did a few minutes prior and sent him a challenge request.

Julius' body shivered, caked in a cold sweat. Every fiber of his being begged him to deny the challenge.

But with Damien hovering over him like this, there was no way he could do that. The terrors he'd experienced in the mere minute he was trapped in the barrier with Damien had left a deep scar in his mind.

With an expression like he'd break out into tears at any second, Julius unwillingly hit the Accept button, swiftly being transported into the arena with Zara soon after.

Now, only Damien stood outside the barrier. He looked at it with a light smile on his face.

'I bet she's having a ton of fun in there...'

Chapter 650 Conflict [2]

Compared to the minute Damien spent with Julius in the duel arena, Zara and Julius remained inside for an entire 5 minutes.

When the barrier finally receded, a happily smiling Zara skipped over to Damien.

"That was a lot of fun! I didn't know it felt so good to relieve stress. We should do this more often!" She said excitedly.

"Dummy!" Damien replied, knocking on her forehead. "We can't just go traumatizing random strangers on the side of the street. Just relax and wait for the enemies to come find us. Then, you can play around to your heart's content."

"But how do you know they'll come for us?" Zara asked.

Damien shrugged. "I mean, if we send their lackey back looking like that, don't you think they'd feel at least a little provoked?"

He pointed at Julius' slumped figure. He was prone on the ground with his rear pointing skyward. His mouth foamed and his eyes were dull and empty.

"Sheesh, what the hell did you do to him? I think his spiritual world collapsed entirely from the stress." Damien commented in wonder and a bit of fear. Zara's methods had always been on the crueler side.

In response, Zara flashed a bright smile like sunshine lighting up a gloomy day. "Hm? I just showed him the first four moves from Master's 'Asshole Men Should Suffer' technique set. Did I go overboard?"

"Cough, n-no you didn't...Tang Lingzi, she...never mind."

Damien coughed awkwardly and shook the matter off. Since he and Zara were so close, he never needed to worry about experiencing Tang Lingzi's terrifying skill set...right?



Its name alone made him shudder in fear. But in this case, it did work in his favor. He'd been planning to completely break Julius from the start.

A savage grin spread on his face. He'd always been the type to avoid trouble or cut the weeds and stomp the roots whenever he met a troublesome situation. He'd lived a relatively straightforward life because of this trait of his.

He wasn't a fan of needless conflict and unnecessary escalation.

But that was in normal times.

Right now, Damien wanted strength as fast as possible. To grow, he needed as much conflict as he could stomach.

As he started to shine brighter and brighter in Hidden Death Valley, people would inevitably start viewing him differently. Some might even back off and attempt to befriend him based on their projections of his potential.

He needed to make sure there was at least one powerful adversary that had animosity so great that they'd pursue him regardless of consequence, to the point of self-destruction.

Only then could he create a villain that'd keep him entertained.

The rumors he'd heard about Immortal Blood Holy Land were largely negative, and they were also Fallen Star Holy Land's enemy. Fallen Star Holy Land wasn't a close friend of Damien's, but he at least had a favorable impression of them due to Atticus...

"...no. Needlessly justifying my actions will only delude me into a god complex."

Damien stopped himself from thinking about the bigger picture. He knew deep down that he didn't care about those conflicts at all. Growing his personal strength, this selfish reason was why he decided to oppose Immortal Blood Holy Land.

After experiencing the Challenge Gate, Damien no longer wanted to reject who he was. His general indifference towards others and selfishness weren't traits he could change. They were defining parts of his personality and traits he developed from those years he spent alone and rabid like a beast.

He only needed to quell this indifference for the people he cared about. For those that didn't fit this category, he no longer felt the need to consider them enough to justify how he acted towards them.

He did what he wanted. If they didn't like how he carried himself, they could stay away from him. And if they decided to oppose him...

Julius' slumped body disappeared and reappeared in Damien's hand. He walked over to his private dorm's door and put his finger about 1/4th of the way down from the top.

Bzzt!

World Force gathered and solidified. The door began to morph. The wood that made up its surface collected and extended into a spike jutting out from the top of the door.

After controlling the earth below to fill the gaps left by the wood he used to make the spike, Damien took Julius and hung his body from it for all to see.

"Come on, let's see what our home for the next few years looks like," Damien told Zara with a smile after doing so.

Zara smiled back and waltzed forward. Together, the two entered the room as if nothing happened.

After checking the room out a bit, the two went about their own business for the night. Zara meditated to feel the Shadow Laws around her, which were especially present due to Hidden Death Valley's particular location. As for Damien, he began thinking about a plan for the coming mission.

Night turned to day quickly. After all, most of the night had already been spent by Damien and Zara enjoying Star City. Only a few hours after their altercation with Julius, the artificial sun rose over the horizon and painted the academy with light.

As more and more people stepped outside to start their days, Julius' body was immediately discovered.

A crowd gathered around Damien's dorm room. People used various recording devices to take pictures and videos of Julius, which spread through the academy like wildfire.

Still, Damien's name entering Heaven's List went unnoticed. The points he got from defeating Julius only put him around the 50,000s in the end, most likely because his strength was evaluated to far surpass his opponent's.

As people excitedly began to wonder about and search for the owner of this new private dorm's identity, a different scene was taking place in a palace on the other side of Star City.

A man with bloody red hair and crimson eyes sat on a throne. A servant kneeled before him, showing him an image of Julius and reciting the events that were taking place outside.

Kacha!

The wine glass in the man's hand shattered, the stench of blood wafting from the wine stains that formed.

"I see," he muttered. "Atticus' new dog...what an interesting guy."

A smile spread on his face. Despite his curious tone, his expression was frighteningly cold. A terrifying killing intent leaked from his eyes.

"You've only just arrived, but you so boldly provoke me...interesting, how interesting."

He continued repeating his words. The kneeling servant shivered in fear, not daring to move an inch from his spot.

"Just a dog...you're just a dog...what gave you the confidence...?!"

The man's ruthless expression shifted back to its previous indifference in an instant.

"It doesn't matter. You, send someone stronger than that pathetic Wellspring brat. I don't have the time to care about the actions of the Fallen Star Holy Son's dogs. If he keeps acting up, though...I might have to consider showing my dear friend how to properly discipline his pets."

A wicked smile spread across his face as he spoke. Standing up, he left the throne room.

The kneeling servant's head fell to the floor as he did so.

The man took a sip of the crimson wine that'd just filled his glass.

"Damien Void, was it? I look forward to seeing the source of your confidence."