

Void 731

Chapter 731 Eye [1]

Was it a month that passed after that day?

Damien didn't know. His squad hadn't stopped moving during the time that passed, so trying to understand its span was difficult to do.

After Theasi was destroyed, the nearby bases at Engra and Lilas were taken care of as well. With the immediate area cleansed of Nox, the group moved on to the next.

Calypto as a whole had 8 continents on its surface, taking up most of the world's space. The continent that Damien and the rest landed on was succinctly termed the Jade Continent due to the overflowing jade-green color that used to permeate it.

Nowadays, that color was wholly replaced with the same desolation as the rest.

Nevertheless, the Jade Continent was relatively small. There were only a few thousand peripheral bases present here, and none of them mattered in terms of the Infected Source World's general operations.

In essence, the troops here could be called reserve forces or cannon fodder.

For this reason, they all were around the same level as the Nox in Theasi, a level that was all too easy for Damien and his group to take on.

The Jade Continent found itself cleansed of Nox within a single month. It wasn't just because of the efficiency and speed of the squad's movements, but also because of their personal hatred fueling their actions.

They rarely took rest, moving immediately from one base to another. With the perpetualness of their movements and the ferocity of their attacks, tens or even hundreds of bases could be targeted in a day.

Of course, this would've been impossible without Damien's presence.

As time passed, he realized the value of the people who'd been grouped with him in this operation. None of them were weaklings, and while their mentalities were still in the process of tempering, none of them shied away from the trials they had to go through.

If they were alone, they'd be forced to take breaks to recover mana and stamina. No being in the world had the capability to move perpetually without consequence.

But Damien had the Void Physique, a power that seemed to always find a way to surpass the world.

The mana-gathering method he usually used for himself became available to everyone. The Void Physique punched a hole in reality and sucked any and all mana in the atmosphere into its grasp. It was up to Damien how to repurpose this mana once he had it.

And for the past month, he'd been providing it to his squad so they could move without restrictions.

Even aside from this, Damien's teleportation allowed them to move at speeds that wouldn't have been possible on their feet or through the sky. Going from base to base, a process that could've cost them many hours of precious time, became an afterthought.

The ten bases a day they could take without setting aside time for recovery suddenly ballooned into the hundreds.

With such a routine continuing for so long, how could the Jade Continent's Nox survive?

Currently, the group sat on the continent's edge looking out on the mucus-like seas beyond. For the first time in a month, they took a day for themselves.

'Their physical health has been maintained by me, but their mental health is probably a mess right now. I'm surprised they aren't on the verge of collapse.' Damien thought to himself.

Even now, after enduring so much stress, those three were setting up a campfire and grilling some of the beast meat they brought as rations. It was unbelievable when he compared them to their past selves.

'It's a bit of a shame, though...'

For some reason, the more he saw them grow, the more he felt like their current circumstances were corrupting the innocence they once held.

These people weren't young at all. Even Ash, the youngest, was 24. Still, whether it was 20 or 30, it was all still considered a genius' growth-period. Only after 500 years would one's strength be considered saturated.

Damien couldn't help but see them as kids. Even if he was younger than Tyler, he'd experienced too much more to care about something as paltry as a few-year difference in age.

The "innocence" they held couldn't be called innocence considering that they'd been raised in the Hell Hole, but the blissful ignorance they possessed towards the struggles of the weak was something to be envied.

Because even the most indifferent person would sigh seeing this ignorance get shattered.

'Well, I hope they can keep at least a spark of that youthful exuberance within them. For now, enjoying moments of peace like this is the only way they can do so. As for me...'

Damien didn't have time for peace. Unlike them, he had a far greater mission to accomplish.

'It should be about a month before I can get there, but I might as well prepare beforehand.'

He sat down in a lotus position and closed his eyes, sending his awareness into the earth.

He was curious about something.

When he saw Apeiron or the Cloud Plane's World Core, he was met with a degree of corruption the Nox had achieved over time before the purge took place. However, the unnamed world's World Core was in perfect condition.

Even though it was an Infected Source World, even Wrath couldn't have predicted that a Primal Sovereign was slumbering beneath its surface. Naturally, with a Primal Sovereign's natural protection field, the World Core didn't get corrupted no matter how much the Nox tried.

But what about Calypto...?

It was simply impossible for one of the four remaining Primal Sovereigns to take residence within Calypto. That kind of coincidence never happened twice.

In that case, what state would the planet's World Core be in?

It didn't take long for him to find out.

Damien's consciousness was pulled into the center of the world. He could clearly feel a rejection force stemming from what lay there, but this force couldn't hold him back at all.

World Cores were infinitely powerful constructs, but in front of a Celestial, they could only submit.

'Haa, I guess I expected it, but this is still pretty jarring to see up close.' Damien sighed inwardly when he finally made his way to the World Core.

It was just as black as a starless sky. The disgusting gloop that made up the World Core writhed disgustingly in response to Damien's presence.

'It can't be saved.'

The Nox mana corrupting the Cloud Plane's World Core was like a tumor. As long as it was removed, the remaining material could be salvaged.

However, this World Core had been fully corrupted. Down to its very core, it was transmuted into something only the Nox could explain.

'If I devour it, the world will collapse. Plus, since it's Nox mana, I can't even benefit from it.'

A Celestial Mana Thread shot forth from Damien's finger and tried to pierce the Infected World Core, but it was met by a barrier of rejection immediately upon contact.

'As I thought, controlling it is also impossible. Do I have to possess Nox mana to do so?'

As he quietly observed the World Core, its writhing form began to change.

An eye appeared on its surface.

Damien smiled when he saw it. "You finally noticed me? Well, that's not a problem. I've been wanting to have a talk with you for a while now."

Chapter 732 Eye [2]

The eye blinked as if surprised by Damien's immediate reaction.

"You were predicting my presence?"

A booming voice filled the empty cavity where the World Core resided. Just hearing it almost burst Damien's eardrums.

"Of course I was expecting you. If not, why would I come here so rashly."

Damien was, in fact, not expecting this situation to occur.

'They can form a direct connection to the World Core deep enough to use it as an avatar? What methods are they using?'

Even a Celestial couldn't use a World Core as an avatar, because a World Core was fundamentally unable to function as such.

World Cores, despite their heaven-defying power, were heavily restricted by the universal law. Even their bonds with Celestials were regulated by this overarching rule. It was fundamentally impossible for a World Core to function outside of the set restrictions,

'Then, are they completely rewriting the World Core's existence into something different? What is its purpose? And more importantly...just how?'

A feeling of uncharacteristic and irresistible greed suddenly overcame Damien. His instinct as a Celestial was dying to understand the Nox's methodology, for it could be extremely useful to his growth.

Damien quelled this feeling instantly. By the time the mysterious eye responded, he'd already wrapped up his thoughts.

"Foolish human. If you wish for death so badly, I do not mind granting it to you."

The World Core's mana immediately began moving.

"Hey, hey! Calm down a bit. Can't you see I'm only here for some idle conversation?"

The eye glared at Damien. "For what reason would I desire to converse with a lower existence? Stop your foolishness and perish."

The World Core's mana flared. Disgusting black ink splattered across the walls of the cavity, fluctuating as they pressured Damien.

'Fuck, who is this guy?!' Damien thought inwardly as he resisted the pressure.

His Celestial Authority spread and enveloped his body, and the World Force he could access through the World Core Fusion Reactor in his spiritual world was unleashed in full.

"Old ghosts like you...just don't know how to be civil! Damn!"

The Demon Dragon Transformation followed his words. His body was immediately enhanced manifold, making it much easier to resist the pressure.

On top of the multi-layer protection he laid outside his body, he consciously revolved Void Mana through his system to expel or devour any Nox Mana that managed to pierce his defense.

"Hoh?" The voice in the eye made a sound of intrigue. "To think you would acquire something like that...how interesting..."

Waves of inky black mana surrounded Damien and started digging into his protection layers like worms. His World Force, his Celestial Authority, his Demon Dragon Body, none were able to stop their invasion.

"Gah!" Damien gasped.

The first worm of mana managed to pierce his skin and dig into his body.

The first was followed by a second, a fourth, a tenth, and countless more until Damien's entire body was covered in what looked like a black suit of armor.

'This...is...fucking...disgusting!' Damien roared internally. His internal body was searing with pain. Each worm that entered left a deep stabbing pain that felt like it impaled his soul.

'Break!'

Void mana revolved more furiously with every passing instant, causing mana to rush in and out of Damien's body in waves. Spacetime Essence, Void Flames, any cards Damien had were fully displayed in his bid to stay alive.

And it worked.

Pshhhhhh!

With the sound of meat searing on a grill, the countless worms within his body were burned and expelled, transformed into pure essence that he then absorbed and recycled to fortify his defense.

'But these little fuckers won't stop coming!'

His opponent had an entire World Core's worth of mana to throw at him. No matter the situation, even if he uses the Void Physique's mana hole to recuperate, he wouldn't be able to compete.

'Dammit!!' Damien roared once more. Anger began to cloud his mind. He refused to die in such a stupid manner, in a situation that appeared as randomly as this one.

His mana began to fuse with the inky black mana entering his body.

The inky mana was like a parasite, actively corrupting his own mana into its form. If Damien allowed this to continue, he'd be crippled at the very least.

And even if it wasn't a permanent injury, losing the thread of himself that he sent to the World Core space would leave him bedridden for a good amount of time, even if he used [Heal] continuously.

Yet, despite knowing the consequences of failing here, Damien couldn't find a method to escape.

'Material Shift'

'Dimension Shift'

'Phase Shift'

'Stagnant Reality'

'Fuck! Just freeze'

Time and space shattered around him, reality was slightly cracking under the pressure of his will, but the mana worms in his body seemed to defy reality itself.

In that moment, reddish-black sparks flew.

Damien's eyes were colored in madness.

'FUCK!'

His body felt on the verge of exploding. A mysterious force entered his system and enhanced every facet of his abilities, allowing him to forcefully increase the time he could resist.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Damien's aura exploded with the flames of hell. The World Core space began to crack from the pressure of his aura. Any mana worms that approached this deathly flaming aura were burned to cinders before they could even reach Damien's body.

In response, all the eye had to do was increase its power output.

A World Core...was something even a Demigod couldn't face the explosion of.

The final shred of resistance Damien had collapsed. His body once again became a nest for those mana worms who burrowed into his skin. He could feel their slimy bodies crawling through his internals and propagating.

"AHHHHHHHH!" He let out a guttural scream. He pushed Void Mana to its limits, wrapping it around his body like a cocoon and isolating his systems.

He ripped his arms off.

He ripped his legs off.

He could regrow them when he had the time, but the ones that were already attached to his body had just become breeding grounds for that atrocious mana.

Yet, just as Damien prepared to take drastic measures to save himself...

...the pressure suddenly lost its weight. Damien didn't even have time to realize his mortality before it happened.

"Human...you are quite different from your peers." The eye scoffed.

Damien didn't respond. As he caught his breath, his body began changing, influenced by the reddish-black energy surrounding him.

With the terrifying appearance that the energy gave him and the half-regrown limbs dangling from his body, he looked like a demon straight from the 9th layer of hell.

But this form of his didn't seem to faze the eye in the slightest.

"Hahaha, still so eager to fight? Interesting human, I do not wish to kill you so early. Let us meet once your blood has matured. At that point, I wonder whether you'll still have the gall to stand up to me..."

"Remember this, my title is Saint Emperor. I'll be looking forward to your future growth..."

The eye vanished on its own.

The sickly mana receded back into the World Core.

And Damien woke up.

His mind whirled to life. Confusion was eminent on his face.

'What...the fuck just happened?'

Chapter 733 Fragments [1]

A campfire cookout was in full swing. The smell of delectable purified beast meat wafted through the air, and the sound of conversation accompanied it.

Tyler, Ash, and Synth took their time to enjoy the barbecue of their own creation. If not today, then when would they ever get another chance? Even if they wanted to rest, Damien wouldn't allow them.

When it was time for battle, he was a hellish drill instructor that pushed his students until they dropped.

Nevertheless, Damien didn't join his "students" in their celebratory atmosphere. He sat many meters away contemplating what took place within the World Core Space.

'Saint Emperor...is he the father of the Saint King?'

If so, he was surely a Demigod.

'But if he's so powerful, why did he spare me?'

By all rational logic, the Saint Emperor had no reason to keep Damien alive. Even if he didn't know him, the fact that the young genius could interact with the World Core should've been enough to provoke him into killing Damien for safety's sake.

But instead, he decided to let him grow?

'He reacted to something within me...what was it?'

He thought back over the Saint Emperor's words. From beginning to end, he'd only spoken in vague riddles, but there must've been something in there that Damien could grasp onto.

A light appeared in his mind as he thought.

'Didn't he say he'd wait for my blood to mature...? And before that, he reacted after I used the Demon Dragon Form...'

At first, Damien instantly believed that the Saint Emperor was convinced by his Void Mana, but this didn't seem to be the case. While it was impossible for the Demigod to miss the strangeness of Damien's mana, because he wasn't using Void Essence himself, the actual scent of the Void was difficult to distinguish.

If so, then the only other viable connection was his Demon Bloodline.

The Demon Bloodline, in reality, had nothing to do with Demons. It was a bloodline that appeared after Damien devoured the dark material that the Demons in the Trial World were using as their source of power.

'And that dark material came from a Nox Demigod.'

It wasn't like swallowing Nox Mana or essence as he'd done until this point. Something about the spark of Divinity that lay latent within those pieces of dark material gave them a special property that Damien had yet to see replicated.

And because of their source, it wasn't hard for Damien to make the connection.

'My Demon Bloodline has been latent ever since I received it. It only activates when I call upon it, and otherwise makes no moves, unlike the fiery dragon bloodline that seems to rage every time I enter battle.'

But the fact that he'd never sensed anything strange didn't mean that nothing strange existed.

'I should keep better watch over it in the future. If it truly does try to corrupt me...I have to take action immediately.'

Damien didn't plan to throw an important card like his Demon Bloodline away so easily. Aside from that, he had faith that his control over the Void would heighten to a point where any internal resistance would become impossible in the future.

'On that note, I should spend more time comprehending the Void than thinking idly. The incident with the World Core has helped me confirm enough suspicions, but it isn't something I can affect in my current state.'

No matter how much knowledge he had, he couldn't make use of it without power.

With that in mind, Damien closed his eyes and focused inward, latching onto his connection with the Void Physique and slowly sinking into comprehension.

The party of his squad members continued deep into the night. By the time Damien woke up from his comprehensive state, the three young geniuses were passed out around the fire in various comedic poses.

'Sheesh, it's like this is their first time having fun.' Damien thought wryly as he walked over.

On the way, he noticed Zara sitting off in the distance.

He furrowed his brows in thought.

Zara had been especially quiet ever since they left Death Emperor Star. Considering her excitement before they left, it was extremely worrying for Damien, who saw her as a younger sibling.

'Is she that anxious?' He wondered. It wasn't hard for him to figure out where her mood switch came from.

To Zara, this expedition meant more than just stopping the Nox. This was a quest that heavily impacted her identity.

'Zara's bloodline is related to the Nox somehow, this much we know. But I don't know if we can find out anything substantial from Calypto...'

Damien wanted to help, but he didn't know how to. This problem was something Zara had to overcome on her own.

'Haa...how annoying.'

If it was up to him, he'd storm the world until he found the answers she wanted. Sadly, he didn't have the ability nor the tactlessness to do so.

He could only watch over her from afar and make sure she didn't succumb to negativity.

'Even if we can't find answers here, I'll take you across the entire universe and beyond until you get what you want. I swear on my life.'

Damien made a silent vow as he turned away from her.

He moved thereafter towards the campfire, kicking the three geniuses awake so they could move on.

It was time for them to raid the Lotus Continent, the continent nearest to their current Jade Continent.

And perhaps there, they'd have some more luck finding something substantial.

A universe collapsed.

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

A man's bloody figure dashed through the blackness. The sound of his breaths was the only thing keeping him sane.

'I have to...escape!'

His thoughts sped as he raced away from the collapsing universe. The blackness around him hindered his every step and skewed his sense of direction. Even though he was born in this same blackness, it never accepted him as its own.

'I have to tell someone...I have to run...this is...madness!'

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

He ran for what seemed like ages. His mana collapsed multiple times, and his body didn't want to listen to his command. But every time he felt like giving up, he remembered the atrocities he'd witnessed prior.

The strength to keep moving came instantly when he did so.

He could never return to that place.

'Do they not realize it? No, the ones who realized have already left. I'm...the only one remaining.'

He felt suffocated.

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

In the distance, a fragment of light beckoned towards him.

His skin immediately tingled with anticipation.

'Finally...finally! How many years has it been?'

He increased his speed and rushed towards the light.

And at the same time, he felt a plethora of auras lock onto his position.

'No...!'

"ASTAROTH!"

A booming voice traveled through the blackness and rang in his ears. Just the sound alone made him bleed.

But he ignored this pain as if it didn't exist.

It didn't matter if they caught up to him.

He'd already arrived at his destination.

The fragment of light was just in front of him.

Through its blinding rays, he could hazily see an atmosphere unlike his current one.

An atmosphere where the blackness didn't reign.

He rushed through the crack, and in the next instant, he disappeared.

The only thing remaining in his place...was a picture of galaxies and stars as far as the eye could see.

Chapter 734 Fragments [2]

Zara abruptly opened her eyes. The feeling of cold sweat pouring down her back seemed especially sensitive today.

'What...what was that?' She thought shakily.

The scene she'd just witnessed, what was it? Where did it take place? Who were those people? And most importantly, who was that man?

The questions in her head piled up higher than any mountain peak. The unfortunate part was, this wasn't the first load of mysteries that'd been dumped on her in recent times.

Ever since the group landed on Calypto, she kept seeing these strange images.

It wasn't always that man.

Sometimes it was merely scenery, gruesome scenery she'd never witnessed in person. Sometimes it was other people, but they only appeared as hazy outlines in her mind.

She could barely remember their voices when she opened her eyes.

'It hurts...'

Her splitting headache never faded and her mental state became infinitely worse with every passing day. No matter how she tried to ignore it and move on, the strange visions didn't allow her any respite.

Ba-dum!

Her heart suddenly beat powerfully, almost leaping out of her chest.

The world was enveloped in shadows.

The hazy outline of a man appeared before her.

'This is...'

As Zara watched from the side, the man began to move in a strange pattern. His feet glided across the ground like it was made of ice, his body twisting delicately as if he was dancing to the most subtle melodies in the world.

Without even realizing it, Zara began following his movements.

Her left foot went forward, her right foot circled around, her hands raised into the air and naturally flowed with her movements.

The mana in the air became excited. It whirled to life and buzzed around her like tiny little spirits enjoying her performance. Light and darkness split in two and populated each side of her body.

But Zara didn't even notice it.

As she continued following the mysterious man's movements, her momentum grew until finally...!

The light and darkness combined as one. They swirled together like yin and yang in a basketball-sized cavity in front of Zara's body.

At that moment, she abruptly opened her eyes.

The vision came to an end.

The ball of counteracting energies fizzled out of existence.

Zara fell to the ground panting. Despite her mana capacity being almost full, she felt as if she'd drained it completely.

Collapsing to the floor, Zara clutched her head in pain.

'Just...what is going on?!'

Unlike the Jade Continent, the Lotus Continent was far more connected to the Nox's main force. Of the seven remaining continents, it was still only seventh in overall power, but the significance of the Lotus Continent lay elsewhere.

"The Lotus Continent is essentially where the Nox are getting all of their resources," Tyler stated as he looked at his holographic world map.

"Whether it's metals and minerals, precious herbs, or even people, the Lotus Continent has them in abundance. Or at least, had. I can't say what the current state of the continent is."

"The people have likely all been captured at this point, but I doubt they've gathered all the resources they desire yet. If they had, there's no way this world would still be standing." Damien responded.

The World Core was already completely under their control, as was the world's population. By all intents and purposes, Calypto was completely conquered.

"There's a reason the commander only ordered us to stall for time rather than fighting all out. The Nox outnumber us by far too much for our small group of 5000 to dream about exterminating them." Damien muttered.

Calypto was an Infected Source World. This meant that it wasn't just an ordinary Nox base, it was more akin to a factory that mass-produced mindless 3rd class Nox for the Higher Nox to throw around as they pleased.

While these 3rd class Nox could be killed with a single look by someone at Damien's power level, their sheer numbers made them difficult to face.

After all, nobody had infinite mana in this apocalypse.

"The Lotus Continent probably has some hints about the creation process. If we can find those hints, it won't just be beneficial to us, but also to any soldiers who have to raid Infected Source Worlds in the future."

By this assumption, the group chose their plan of attack. While their movements wouldn't deviate much from their strategy on the Jade Continent, their goal was far more robust.

'Utterly decimate any plans that the Nox might have.'

The group moved with this intention, slowly making their way inland as they circled the continent's periphery and took down base after base.

Compared to the Jade Continent, the forces were only marginally stronger. Besides an increase in the number of mid-level 4th class Higher Nox, there wasn't much of a change.

'This is only the seventh continent and mid-level Higher Nox are becoming common. By the time we get to the main base, am I going to see extreme peak 4th classes on the street like cabbages?' Damien joked to himself.

He waved his arm and enveloped the group in front of him in spatial mana, promptly sending them to the Sanctuary.

It was around the 1500th "food supply" they'd come across, and yet another few thousand people who'd been welcomed to Theavel.

'Sheesh, it's going to get crowded if we keep going like this.'

Despite his complaints, Damien was actually quite pleased with the sudden influx of denizens on Theavel. After all, the relationship between a world and its people was symbiotic.

A world grew through the achievements of its population, while the people were given residence and mana by the world so they could comprehend its laws. The more people living in Theavel, the more who explored its various regions and conquered it, the more the world itself would grow and evolve.

Another half month passed without any change to the routine. Damien and his squad slowly became more synchronized and efficient, and before long, they were closing in on the central area of the continent.

"That mine is what they've been fiercely trying to protect as we've moved. Even if it isn't what we've been looking for, there should be something noteworthy in there." Tyler commented.

Damien nodded. The closer they got to this very mine, the more fierce the resistance was. There were no longer Nox who tried to run away to save their lives. Even the most cowardly enemies threw themselves at Damien and the rest with abject terror in their eyes.

'Either there's an eldritch horror waiting for us underground, or we just hit the jackpot.' Damien thought to himself with a smile.

"Then, let's not deviate from the usual strategy for now. Just remember to be cautious, and don't lose sight of those around you."

With those words, Damien took the lead and entered the mine. The cold and damp atmosphere was completely unexpected from a place that seemed like it'd be filled with dry humidity. The ground squelched under their feet as they walked, almost as if they were in a swamp.

But that rotten smell...

'It's blood.' Damien realized instantly.

The analogy that blood flowed like a river was often used to describe massacres, but was it truly realistic? It was hard to imagine how much blood was necessary to truly form a river.

Yet, here and now, Damien encountered that very situation.

His eyes hardened.

'This scene...is oddly familiar.'

Chapter 735 Methods [1]

The group quietly made their way through the mine, using Zara's Shadow Laws to conceal themselves within the darkness.

Eventually, the tunnel opened up onto a large natural cavern.

Drip!

The tunnel exited about halfway up the cavern's wall. The bloody stream flowing through its ground dripped onto the cavern floor, taking its role as the only sound within the eeriness of the atmosphere.

But the dripping blood wasn't alone on that ground. It fell into what looked like a lake of blood, gathered for unknown purposes.

"There's light on the other side. You three stay here with Zara and investigate the cavern. I'll go scout." Damien sent a sound transmission to his squad members.

The three young geniuses and Zara nodded. Since Damien could teleport if the situation got out of hand, he was the best scout among them. And with Zara's concealment abilities, they would have a far easier time moving through the cavern.

After receiving their confirmation, Damien's figure immediately vanished and reappeared on the other side of the cavern. There, a continuation of the previous tunnel was present.

'There must've been a rail system in place when this place was still actively used as a mine, but it was taken down when it was repurposed by the Nox.' Damien thought idly as he walked down the new tunnel.

His figure soon turned illusory and disappeared altogether.

'One With Dimension'

It was a concealment technique created using Zara's shadow concealment as a base. Damien's body melded into the dimension itself rather than the spatial layers, essentially becoming part of nature.

This ability was perfect for stealth, but it had a major caveat. The degree of fusion forced Damien to remain stationary. If he wanted to move without exposing himself, he'd have to precisely control the flow of his mana and tune it to the environment as he did so.

This was still above Damien's level. His understanding of natural law was still in the process of forming, and he'd barely touched on the concept of "flow" that he'd begun noticing not too long ago.

However, in the current situation, he didn't need mobility.

Laid out in front of him was an all-too-familiar scenery.

It was a lab-like space filled with scientists and researchers. Technological equipment that didn't match Calypto's aesthetic at all was strewn about. However, more than any of this, the main occupants of the lab's space were large vats filled with unknown liquid and, as Damien had long been expecting, tanks filled with bodies.

'It's another one of those.' He thought to himself.

He'd been seeing them everywhere. He saw them in the Niflheim base on earth, in the secret auction on the Cloud Plane, and practically everywhere on the unnamed world. He always knew that the Nox had plans involving the horrific procedures they performed in these facilities, but he was never able to understand what those plans were.

Of course, he had plenty of guesses, one of which was likely correct. The Nox didn't seem like a race that was involved with heavy scheming. Rather, they seemed the type to blaze through everything with sheer force, ironically similar to Damien.

Regardless, Damien refused to give any of his conjectures weight until he had solid proof. Because if any of his thoughts were true, they would have a serious impact on the war itself.

'For all I know, the things I'm questioning have already been answered by Heaven's Army, who've been combatting the Nox for years now. Still, until I get access to that information, I have to find out myself.'

Slowly, Damien masked his presence and undid his concealment, stealthily moving through the darkness of the tunnel and arriving inside the facility.

The bright white lighting scheme disallowed any sort of shadow concealment, and the turbulent mana in the air made it difficult to move without alerting anyone.

'Without One With Dimension, it's impossible for me to get deeper.' Damien realized.

Only Zara, with her freakish concealment skills, would be able to take them deeper into the lab.

'I guess I'll just observe a bit and return.'

Damien sat quietly for many hours and watched the scientists work. He watched as they experimented on both living and dead bodies, injecting them with various serums and feeding them various pills to gauge their reactions.

The most common result was a torturous death.

The blackness of Nox mana or the strangeness of the other serums that were being injected would almost always cause the victims to deform grotesquely and mutate into beasts that died thereafter. Additional limbs were only the most basic growths that formed.

When the inevitable failure took place, the corpses were submerged in the vats of liquid and melted down to their base components.

'The mana doesn't dissipate.'

It was the first thing Damien noticed about the vats.

Usually when a person died, their mana and essence would disperse into the atmosphere. This was where the term "becoming one with nature" originated from.

However, these vats carried a special property that allowed them to store the deceased's mana and even amplify it as it was fused into the vat's liquid.

'They've already used over 1200 bodies in the past 2 hours, yet there hasn't been a single success. Are they even aiming for success in the first place?'

From the looks of it, the various drugs and serums that were being developed were only purposed for torture. Perhaps Damien would find something if he waited a little longer...

A change occurred.

A dead body that was injected with black fluid suddenly twitched.

After the initial injection, sickly black veins climbed up the body until they formed a spiderweb encompassing the entire nervous system. Afterwards, the liquid invaded the corpse's dormant bloodstream and reactivated it.

The heart was forcefully restarted and used to filter out old blood and replace it with the new mutated blood.

At the same time, the liquid's control over the corpse's nervous system became increasingly prominent, which was mirrored by the spread of the sickly black color on the skin.

And when both of these processes reached their pinnacle...

The body twitched.

Crash!

Nearby surgical equipment flew across the area as the twitches transitioned into a full seizure. The corpse thrashed around violently and mutated, becoming far taller and more robust than it was when it was alive.

And finally, when the thrashing calmed down...

The corpse opened its eyes.

Two pitch-black sclerae stared into the world. Like foam balls surfacing atop a lake of slime, red-slitted pupils formed in those eyes.

GRAAAAAAAAAAH!

The being that replaced the corpse roared madly. In that moment, as if they'd been expecting it, the surrounding researchers rolled a machine over and turned it on. The machine emitted a frightening vibration that felt like an earthquake, immediately calming down the new creature.

As he watched the scientists sedate the creature and store it in a separate enclosure away from the unused body, he couldn't overcome his shock.

He didn't care about the reanimated dead body, as it was only the obvious outcome from the connotations that he deduced.

Instead, his thought process followed something far greater than a single body.

'Those things...are parasites?' Chapter 736 Methods [2]

Parasites.

Damien hadn't encountered many parasitic species in the universe, even during his many years of exploring its sights. It was strange. Considering the mystical properties of mana, parasitic species should've thrived in its advent.

However, while he'd experienced some similar scenarios, he'd never seen a true parasite in the past 10 years.

Why was that?

At its core, mana was a form of energy. But at the same time, mana was a core trait of the universe that allowed it to maintain its functionality.

With the advent of mana, the universal law could develop more thoroughly and become accessible enough for humans and other sentient lifeforms to comprehend and utilize, heightening the connection between the universe and its residents.

While regular parasites could function without mana, it was obvious what evolved parasitic species depended on. The blood that used to sustain them wasn't enough anymore. They needed to consume something more intrinsic, something like life force or mana.

The problem was, mana flowing through the body was far more in tune with an individual's psyche than their blood flow. The senses of a practitioner also far outstripped those of an average mortal.

Being parasitic without alerting the parasitized being was nearly impossible. This led to the natural decline of parasitic species as most species evolved away from that trait.

The only parasitic species that existed more commonly were those controlled by existences, parasites like the one Lucius was living with.

But...what would happen if a race appeared that didn't have this kind of prolonged contact with the rest of the universe? And what if this race was belligerent enough to openly parasitize others without fear of death?

The current situation was exactly that.

The struggles that led to the natural decrease in parasitic species didn't apply to the Nox, who forcefully parasitized their hosts with the aid of others.

'I need to get closer. If I can get a vial containing a parasite, it'd be revolutionary.'

Lynn Carter's image immediately appeared in Damien's mind. She wasn't just a genius researcher and scientist, she was also someone who was once a double agent within Niflheim, a Nox influence.

'The serum in the Human Domain most likely didn't contain parasites, since the war hasn't reached our sector yet. Instead, the experiments conducted there are likely for the goal of creating artificial Nox, or a slave-like fighting force of some kind.'

If Lynn Carter had encountered the Nox parasites before, she would've told Damien. That wasn't something they'd hide from each other when attempting to build mutual trust.

But if she were to encounter the parasites...

'I'm almost completely certain she'd find a way to counteract them.'

Damien observed for a few more minutes and collected his thoughts.

'I should head back.'

Getting into the lab area and observing from close proximity was the most important thing at the moment. Before anything else, Damien needed to get Zara's help.

As soon as he made the decision, his body silently vanished from the area, leaving none the wiser to his presence.

Damien was observing the laboratory for almost 3 hours without pause. During that time, Zara took the three young geniuses to investigate the rest of the cavern.

The cavern floor was largely barren. Besides the blood lake that took up around a third of the cavern, the rest was empty.

However, after ten minutes of scouring the ground, the group located two small hidden passages that led deeper into the world's surface.

Zara silently motioned towards one of them, leading the group down the tunnel.

While Zara was a powerful practitioner, she was also of a wolf bloodline. Her sense of smell was much more heightened than her other senses, allowing her perception to expand to greater limits than others.

From the passage she picked, she could smell something vile, something unknown.

But at the same time, it was something familiar.

The group made it to the end of the passage and...

"Heuk...!"

Ash almost vomited immediately.

The room at the end of the passage was actually quiet small, only fitting for around a thousand people.

However, the number of bodies within was double that.

'This...'

Even Zara couldn't hold back her disgust.

It was a room that once held a thousand pregnant women. These women had been forcefully kept locked in this cramped space until they gave birth.

And their children...

...were half-breeds with Nox genes in their bodies.

The second they were born, they "cannibalized their hosts" to gain sustenance, leading to the current scene.

One thousand skeletons that were stripped down to the bone of any nutritious meat, and a little over one thousand children with blackened sclera and ash grey skin sitting curiously among them.

Evidently, the birth of some of these children was recent, as the blood stains formed by their first meal had yet to disappear.

With disgust in her heart, Zara spread her awareness to check for anything beyond the room, but when she found nothing, she immediately took the three geniuses and left.

They didn't need to see more. The connotations of the horrific scene they'd just barely been too late to witness were enough already.

'Cannibalistic tendencies...'

Zara noted it down in her brain as moved to the second secret passage.

As she expected long ago, it was the guards' quarters.

Even before reaching the passage's opening, Zara could clearly sense tens of Higher Nox auras populating the end of the tunnel.

'Without concealment, we'll cause too much of a scene.' She realized immediately.

The guards themselves were at most at the mid-levels of 4th class, but fighting with them would inevitably bring down the cavern, which was more beneficial to the Nox than it was to them.

Zara made the executive decision to leave that tunnel unexplored for now and began returning back to the main cavern, and at that time, a body appeared in front of her.

Her guard didn't raise even once. Her shadow extended and enveloped the body before it could even fully materialize.

When Damien appeared before her, she flashed a small smile.

"Finished scouting?"

"Mm, all done."

"Then, we should accompany you there, no?"

"Are you reading my mind or something?"

Zara and Damien casually went back and forth as they walked through the tunnel and moved to the lab where Damien was just a moment ago.

Internally, however, they were exchanging notes.

'Cannibalistic babies, huh...' Damien thought as he listened through what Zara and the rest experienced.

Cannibals and parasites, he really couldn't believe his luck to find both in the same place.

'These are two of the primary methods that were used to take over Apeiron.'

The story he heard from Kurt Galloway long ago began to replay in his head. Apeiron's destruction that was barely prevented by the sacrifice of a few heroic Demigods came not from the Nox themselves, but instead from those denizens they corrupted.

It wasn't just Apeiron, but countless worlds who encountered the same problem.

'If we can find a method using what we learn from here...'

It might be possible to save a few more worlds.

Damien's eyes hardened.

He already had other plans in Calypto, but taking a little extra time to carry them out wasn't too much of a problem.

Just like that, yet another objective was added to his mission.

There were definitely more research areas hidden around Calypto, and Damien didn't plan to leave even a single one untouched.

Chapter 737 Jinxed [1]

With Zara's help, accomplishing any stealth-based objective was a piece of cake.

Her shadow concealment went against the laws of nature. Even in an area with no darkness, she could hide within the light.

With the three geniuses left at the mine entrance, Damien and Zara returned to the lab and quietly infiltrated its premises.

The researchers within the library were like machines. They were hyperfocused on their objectives, completely unaware of reality.

Therefore, stealing a few samples from under their noses wasn't a problem at all.

'A Parasite and three of the other mysterious serums they've been experimenting with...that should be enough.'

As Damien stored the samples away in his subspace, he thought more about the researchers than their research.

'They're all denizens.' He realized. At first, he assumed the facility was filled with Nox or at least Nox Worshipers, but strangely enough, the lab was the cleanest area of Calypto Damien had seen yet.

'Because I was wandering aimlessly on Death Emperor Star for the past year or so, I'd almost forgotten how blatantly disgusting Nox Mana is.'

From the beginning, Damien had the passive ability to see people's mana. Identifying Nox Worshipers or anyone with even a hint of Nox Mana around then was nothing to him.

Calypto was covered in the substance. The green forests, the vast plains, the ruined cities; every piece of the world Damien had seen until this point was repugnant...

...except the laboratory.

Aside from the Parasites and the separate section of the lab where successful experiments were kept, nothing else reeked of Nox Mana.

'Are they hostages, or...?'

'No, hostages wouldn't work so ardently even if they were being threatened. There was no hesitation in their eyes, as if they were working with objects rather than people.'

Those researchers weren't people being threatened, they were people who sold their souls so they could experience just another second of life.

They were cowards and traitors.

'They haven't been injected with Nox Mana likely so they can keep their rationality while they work. Most Nox Worshipers have a tendency to go berserk when their mana corrupts them to an extent.'

In order to save their own lives, they took the lives of their kin and sided with those aiming to destroy the universe itself.

"Pathetic." Damien scoffed coldly.

He and Zara arrived at the mine entrance where they first entered the facility and met up with the other three.

But before they could leave...

Damien turned back to the large hill that obscured the atrocities taking place below it. His hand raised up into the air, and as if he was calling the start of a race...

Shing!

He sliced his arm through the air.

'Spacetime...Severence'

The world halted.

Within an increment of spacetime that no lower existence could comprehend, the world split.

It was soundless, it was formless. Reality itself changed to match the mana's desire.

One begot two, two begot three, and three begot all things. As if mirroring the truths of the universe in number, the singular cut split into numerous instances that converged in a single spacetime.

And finally, time resumed...

RUMBLE!

The sound of rock and debris collapsing rang out instantly. The screams of those who were crushed by the falling debris were cut off within an instant.

The entire area was split into a grid-like pattern. There wasn't a single stretch of untouched land.

And everything within the given area...

...was erased from existence.

'Devour'

Thick black clouds of smoke leaked from Damien's body and fell into the created pit like a waterfall. It snakes through the debris, taking hold of any organic being it could find and devouring them.

Damien's body shuddered.

He could feel the Nox mana piling up in his body, he could feel the pure essence he received from those researchers, and he could even feel the presence of tens of parasites that were being actively broken down into essence by the clouds of Devour.

Everything was his to consume.

The spectacle ended only a few moments later. Damien retracted the devour clouds back into his body and enjoyed the refreshing feeling of the new essence he'd acquired.

Turning back to his squad, he smiled. It was an extremely cold smile.

"These types of facilities really piss me off. Care to join me in wiping them from existence?"

Zara smiled and rolled her eyes, walking to his side without hesitation. As for the other three...

They had no idea what they'd just witnessed. The level of power wasn't too shocking, but the method of execution was absolutely stunning.

Hearing the words that followed that show, they really couldn't help it.

They could feel the immense heat boiling up in their blood. The desire for battle, for extermination, it was addicting to say the least.

With flames in their eyes clearly portraying their mood, the three responded in unison.

""Yes, sir!""

A half a month passed from that point.

The squad's dynamic became far more solid with the time they spent together, and the problems they had upon meeting faded completely.

Tyler was the most outgoing. While he was a fierce tactician with an incredible brain, Damien was a belligerent general who used fists to get his point across. When the two compared strategies and balanced their tendencies to form a plan, it would always become a spectacle.

Synth maintained her rebellious personality regardless of how time passed, but it seemed she'd chosen to submit to Damien, at the very least. Of the many times she decided to go off on her own in a bout of recklessness, there wasn't a single one where Damien's presence didn't scare her back into line.

Ash's case was the most difficult. While she didn't cause problems and perfectly meshed with the group in times of combat, her fear never disappeared. She could converse normally with her teammates, and she could even occasionally make conversation with Zara, but she couldn't go anywhere near Damien without freezing up.

'I guess nearly killing her best friend would elicit that reaction, yeah.' Damien thought ironically.

Currently, they'd finished their business on the Lotus Continent and moved to the nearby Blue River Continent. This continent was well known for its large waterways and the complex pattern of rivers that populated its surface.

And most of the Nox bases in this continent followed the same pattern. They'd stay near the rivers and pollute the jade-green waters so that no life could survive on the continent's surface. At the same time, they partook in the same cruelties of the Nox on the other two continents.

Taking them down wasn't even a matter of question. The heightening of the Nox's power level didn't even make a dent in the newly named, at Synth's suggestion, Stargazer Squad. Their synergy was enough to destroy even the most heavily guarded bases.

And more than that, the number of lab facilities they'd destroyed wasn't small. The achievements of this squad completely surpassed the other squads present in Calypto.

This was something they knew as fact. After running around 3 continents causing mayhem, it was inevitable for them to meet a few fellow soldiers. Only, these meetings were often short and succinct.

As time passed, the other Hell Hole forces developed a slight ire towards the Stargazer Squad, an emotion that stemmed from jealousy.

However, they didn't let their emotions get to their heads. They weren't on a school field trip, they were at war. Even if the atmosphere didn't match the great battle scenes they'd envisioned in their heads, the work they were doing was still important.

Because without them acting as a distraction, Heaven's Army's main force would have far more trouble on the frontlines.

'Or at least that's what they told us, anyway.'

Chapter 738 Jinxed [2]

Damien somewhat scoffed at the grand goal the commander stated as the mission objective during the final briefing before they touched ground.

Providing a distraction so that Calypto's forces couldn't support the main army on Throh?

Sure it was a viable plan, and a smart one when considering how massive the Nox force on Throh already was, but was it really a good idea to choose students who'd never experienced live combat as the ones to carry out this mission?

It was highly irrational.

Damien didn't doubt that the mission objective was being accomplished, he simply believed that there were other, more dependable measures being put in place to accomplish that goal.

'The point of telling the mission objective to students is to raise their morale by giving them a cause.'

If the Calypto mission was regarded as mere training, it was impossible to elicit such raw passion and determination from the rising soldiers. Instead, the commander chose to instill them with pride in their universe and pride in their mission.

'Looking at the results, his strategy was pretty smart.'

Every group the Stargazer Squad met until this point was highly focused on their mission. Even when they came into conflict with other groups over kill stealing and point stealing, they never allowed the problem to develop since there was a greater enemy to face.

'But still, how can they compare to my kids?'

Damien smiled like a proud dad as he watched the scene of annihilation take place below him.

Ash was in full berserker mode, her towering figure bulldozing through a horde of Lesser Nox. Meanwhile, Tyler's beast form was that of a reptilian dragon as he attacked the Higher Nox in control of that group. Synth flew in the air and provided support for both of her squad members, using an array of drones to control the skies and rain down hell.

While the three of them moved in perfect synchronicity, Zara dashed around the battlefield and provided help wherever help was needed. It was the perfect battle formation.

'It's to the point where I can't even find space to interfere. Really, am I raising a group of monsters or something?'

Despite his thoughts, Damien couldn't hide the pride on his face. From the undeveloped talents they were when they first entered Calypto, the three had blossomed into true geniuses who knew how to adapt and grow by the circumstances.

'It's been a fun trip.'

With that thought, Damien descended to the ground and met up with his squad.

There were three more large bases for them to deal with on the Blue River Continent.

As for the rest...?

They decided to be benevolent and leave the scraps for those other groups who faded into the background due to their accomplishments.

The two-month mark that was supposed to signal the end of the mission was accompanied by an announcement that the mission deadline would be extended another 4 months.

The performance the students showcased far exceeded the commander's expectations, and although saying that the students were a major help in a mission they were supposed to be insignificant in was a stretch, they weren't far from reaching that point.

Of the eight continents of Calypto, 4 had been completely cleared. The main force of Calypto which consisted of millions, if not billions, of Nox beings, was located on the main Willow Continent. Still, there were countless millions of Nox living within the other seven continents, and destroying over half of them in 2 months was an immense achievement for a group of students.

Though, this achievement could mainly be accredited to a single group.

The Stargazer Squad.

Through the records of their academy emblems, it was assured that they weren't cheating in any way to attain their results. They bulldozed their way through Calypto with pure battle prowess and tactical brilliance.

Soon enough, they became an example for all groups to follow.

The commander even reached out to Damien at one point, gaining his permission to turn the Stargazer Squad's battle recordings into examples for the students.

And while others were raving over their achievers, the squad itself showed no care for the attention.

Currently, they stood on the 6th, colloquially termed the Vineyard. Aside from the Willow Continent, this one was by far the most dangerous.

This was because the Vineyard was genuinely a place where nature was the enemy.

Unlike the other continents where most sentient plant life died out, leaving only those in infested areas like forests alive, it wasn't the same on the Vineyard.

Here, the plant life was thriving. It was impossible to walk a single step without finding a sentient plant ready to kill at a moment's notice.

But the most terrifying part...a large majority of these plants had been corrupted by the ambient Nox Mana.

Not only were they a scourge, they were mindless and deadly, like slaves to the Nox residing on the continent.

The Stargazer Squad was able to fight this environment purely due to Damien's Space-Time Domain. With the domain present, nothing was able to intrude on their hunting grounds without permission.

Like this, a majority of the Nox bases on the continent had already been destroyed.

'It's been 3 months since we first arrived here. We spent two months traveling, which leaves me with only a single month before the progress examination at the academy begins...will I really be okay?'

He still hadn't made significant progress on the mission the Director gave him, and even putting that aside, he wouldn't be able to reach the academy in time for the progress examination if things continued like this.

'If the Director doesn't pull some strings to get me back to the academy on time, I'll have to do it myself. Though, it'd be tiring to deal with the problems that come along with that, so I'd rather not.'

Damien cut down with Mirage and split the dimension in half, turning a group of researchers into minced meat.

Was the count already in the hundreds? Damien didn't even know how many laboratories he'd destroyed at this point,

What he did know, however, was that with the sheer number of these facilities he'd seen in the past few months, the number of successfully bred Parasites existing in the universe was already uncountable.

'Well, I can at least be happy that I'm taking care of the ones within my reach. We also haven't met any interference from the main forces of the Nox on Calypto. We should continue moving at this pace and do as much as we can before they notice us.'

Damien regrouped with the others after slaughtering everyone within the lab facility. As a group, they walked out of the facility's secluded entrance and arrived back on the surface.

Their senses immediately became alert.

'Fuck. Did I jinx it?' Damien thought wryly as he spread his awareness.

They were surrounded in all directions.

It was like a sea of black.

Millions of Lesser Nox accompanied by thousands of Higher Nox covered every inch of land and air in the surroundings to make escaping a comedic thought.

A man walked out from the crowd, landing on the ground only a few meters from Damien and the rest.

His dark-grey skin signified his status as a Higher Nox. He dressed like a butler with a large top hat on his head and a monocle covering one eye.

Scanning the group, his eyes soon landed on Damien.

"Ah, yes you must be the one." He said smilingly as he cleared his throat.

"We have come bearing a gift for "the brave boy who dared to fight" from our dear Master."

The Higher Nox butler bowed until his upper body was parallel to the ground and raised his head, smiling eerily.

"Sir Saint Emperor sends his regards."

Chapter 739 Eternal Hour [1]

Somewhere concealed in the starry sky above Calypto was a large destroyer starship. This starship also doubled as Hidden Death Valley's command center.

Currently, the large warship that could easily fit 5000 people like nothing, only held a select few passengers, less than 100, in fact.

Of them, most were part of the information sector, tasked with monitoring, reading, and classifying the deployed soldiers' information.

The ones not partaking in this particular job could be counted on one hand.

The Commander who first briefed the geniuses on their mission was one of them.

Currently, he stared menacingly at a star map.

"The students are doing much better than expected, but on the contrary..."

The first line of defense had already been breached.

The leading Nox Avatar and its strongest followers charged into the starry sky around one month ago, and they'd already breached one of the immense and complex defense lines that'd been set up around Calypto.

"Reports from Throh are chaotic. It's still too soon to understand whether the operation is proceeding in our favor or not. Haa, the only good news in this situation is that at least those kids are safe..."

Since most of the Nox experts in Calypto were in the starry sky fighting against the actual troops set up to restrict their movement, the geniuses on the surface would be safe from a majority of the threats that—

HONG! HONG! HONG! HONG!

The abrupt and jarring sound of alarm bells rang from the information division.

The commander immediately rushed over. When he reached the source of the alarm, he was met with a large number of people moving about with papers and holographic windows floating about.

"This is a completely unexpected situation. The squad is on Continent 6, so the nearest troops that could provide assistance are over an hour away."

"How fast can the starship get there? We must not lose that squadron."

"I agree that they are extremely talented, but their talent will not change reality. If we move the starship now, the invisible pressure our existence puts on the Nox Avatar and its forces will disappear, and the main defense line will be attacked far more harshly. We cannot sacrifice the fate of the universe for a few geniuses!"

The commander pushed his way through the crowd and listened in on the conversation.

'What is this...?'

He finally reached the front of the crowd and saw the scene projected on the screen they were all watching.

A single squadron of five people...

...facing off against an army of Nox fit to conquer an entire world.

The starship was immovable due to the current circumstances.

The nearest forces that could provide aid were over an hour away.

The commander clenched his fists as he watched the screen.

'Please...please try to survive for a single hour!'

"Sir Saint Emperor sends his regards."

Those words echoed around the canyon and amplified, as if forcing the Stargazer Squad to accept the reality they'd just been presented with.

Damien inadvertently frowned as he gazed at the butler's condescending expression. Soon enough, he fixed his expression and smiled back at the butler. "This is quite the reception, isn't it? I didn't know the Saint Emperor cared about me so much."

He replied calmly as his awareness silently spread around him.

For ten thousand kilometers, he could see nothing but a wave of Nox.

It was truly an army that could conquer the world.

Aside from that...

'So the Saint Emperor was someone like that...he is the owner of the Nox Avatar ruling this Infected Source World.'

A few pieces of the puzzle in his head started to click.

He looked back up at the butler and his army.

"I don't know if your master told you, but I'm not a fan of small talk, especially if I'm talking to dogs. You came here for a fight, did you not? Ah, I forgot that dogs don't speak English. Want me to say it again while barking?"

'The emergency signal didn't return any positive responses...1 hour, huh.'

Damien tapped his academy emblem and activated the emergency signal the second he saw the butler.

After all, with the ferocity of the mana raging around his body, he was evidently a high-rank 4th class Nox at the very least, if not an extreme peak level expert.

The response to his call for help, however, was wholly negative.

'That damn Saint Emperor...has he been watching me since then?'

Damien thought back to his encounter with the Demigod a few months back. That day, the Saint Emperor controlled the World Core itself to act as his avatar.

Damien wondered why the Nox expert didn't kill him that day. Most old monsters were adamant about cutting the weeds and pulling the roots regardless of the situation.

'But it seems he just wanted to play with his food a bit.'

He let Damien continue moving unrestrained to drop his guard, and at the moment when he was completely unprepared...

'He dropped an army on my face.'

Damien sighed. None of this would've happened if he'd just made the obvious connection between the Saint Emperor and the Nox Avatar. None of this would've happened if he didn't choose to recklessly interact with an infected World Core with no prior knowledge about its functions.

The Saint Emperor perfectly tracked Damien's movements with ease and prepared the perfect trap.

For the first time, Damien met a tactician who he couldn't overwhelm with brute strength alone.

'I don't know how many millions of them there are, but they'll be endless once we start fighting. In a large-scale battle like this, the Nox's transformation ability shines the brightest.'

The ability to combine after death and be reborn was something a practitioner could combat in smaller situations, but when an entire army was involved, wasting mana on eliminating the Nox remains was impractical.

In fact, it was far more practical to allow the Nox to reform and slowly kill them until they couldn't reform any longer.

After all, no matter how strange the Nox's inherent ability was, it couldn't overcome the barrier of Divinity.

'Alright, it's just a few million, right? It's just an hour, right? Let's just fucking go for it.'

Damien unwillingly accepted the current circumstance. His entire thought process only took a few sparks of an instant, so by the time he gathered his thoughts, the Nox butler was just beginning to reply to his earlier statement.

"Making crass allusions to provoke me will not work, dear sir. However, it is true that we have come here to fight. Or is it better to say...we have come to exterminate?"

The butler raised his body and smiled eerily.

"Since dear sir has stated his discontent towards flowery talks, this humble one shall not bother with it any longer. Then, shall we instead move on to the main event?"

He raised his arm in the air, summoning a cane from the space in front of him.

He grabbed the cane's head and allowed the tip to touch the ground. He clicked his heels and turned his body.

"Please enjoy the gift our dear Master has prepared for you, O beloved guests."

His words echoed through the canyon once more, accompanied by the uncoordinated stomping of the approaching armies.

The butler's body vanished into the crowd.

And Damien's eyes hardened.

'I think I might have to go all out this time.'

Chapter 740 Eternal Hour [2]

Only a few seconds remained until the start of battle, but even seconds were essential to practitioners on Damien's level.

"Listen, just follow my lead and fight. It's the same as always right?"

"Same as always?! How is this the same as always?!"

"O-o-o-one hour? H-how can we possibly resist for that long?"

"This time, I'll have to agree. We are not nearly strong enough to last an hour against an army equipped to take out thousands, if not tens of thousands, of practitioners at our level."

A flurry of sound transmissions were exchanged between the five squad members. Their panic was obvious, and it wasn't like it was unjustified. Damien didn't take the same forceful attitude as he usually did in this specific situation.

"Listen carefully. While the sheer numbers make it feel impossible to win, that's just an illusion. Pain is an illusion, fear is an illusion. You three have spent your entire lives preparing for war, and now that it's here in front of you, you hesitate? Especially when you have such a trustworthy and reliable leader, what reason do you have to fear?"

Damien gave himself a metaphorical pat on the back and grinned like a wild beast.

"Just trust your instincts and fight. If you run out of mana, find me and I'll supply you with more. Remember, we are the Stargazer Squadron! We aren't some side characters that are meant to die here!"

Nobody responded, but the flames in their eyes indeed began to ignite.

Perhaps it was in part due to Damien's speech, or perhaps they'd finally accepted the inevitability of their circumstances, but the three geniuses threw away their fear and hesitation.

As for Zara, when was there a moment she didn't stand tall at Damien's side?

"Go wild and eat as many as you can. Since the Death Seed awakened your connection with the Nox, don't you think consuming more of their mana would be helpful to you?" Damien said to Zara with a smile.

"Mm, I'll try my best," Zara replied succinctly.

Even if she wanted to say more, there was no need for it. Damien could completely understand the emotion behind her words.

"Well, then..." Damien finally spoke aloud.

"Should we get this show started?"

Just as his words fell, they were eclipsed by the sounds of heinous roars and screeches only a few feet away.

And finally...

A tidal wave eclipsed a canoe.

BOOOOOOM!

'Material Shift'

'Stagnant Reality'

'Dimension Shift'

Xiu!

Damien's figure disappeared in a flash at the exact same instant a flying projectile pierced the space where he once stood.

As his body reappeared, reality collapsed where he once was, thousands of Lesser Nox experiencing an abrupt and wholly unscheduled bisection.

BOOOOOOM!

This wasn't the first and it wouldn't be the last, but it almost felt like any damage he did was nothing more than a drop of water in the vast ocean.

"Woah!"

Damien rapidly snapped out of his thoughts and tilted left ever so slightly, barely dodging the war hammer that grazed his face.

"Hey, buddy! Didn't anyone tell you that ambushes are for cowards?!" Damien spouted annoyedly.

"Jie jie jie! There are no cowards in war, only winners and losers!"

The Higher Nox who attacked Damien was short and stumpy, standing at roughly 5 feet tall with a body like a meatball. Strangely enough, his fat didn't jiggle as fat should. It was instead dense and steely like tempered muscles.

"Fatty, you should be careful. I heard this ride has a height restriction."

"Jie jie jie! Did you start spouting nonsense after realizing you are about to die?" The fatty Nox laughed obnoxiously.

"Hm? No. I guess I have to speak in dog terms for anyone here to understand me. So basically, what I meant was...aren't you a little too short to be fighting in wars?"

Damien taunted the fatty with a twisted smile on his face. A face that suddenly enlarged in the fatty's eyes.

'Like master like disciple.'

Hel appeared in his hand and pointed at the Nox's forehead.

"Boom."

Space exploded. Without prior warning or any sort of fluctuation, space between the fatty's eyebrows caved in, impacting him with extreme force.

"Kagh!" The fatty made a phlegmy sound as he flew backwards. He stabilized himself almost immediately, however, and glared back at Damien.

"You rat! Didn't anyone teach you that ambushes are for cowards?!"

"Touché."

Damien teleported once more and covered the distance between him and the fatty in a spark of an instant. His fist swung down at the fatty's face loaded with the power of Spacetime.

'This fatty didn't even get scratched by Hel's bullet. His power might not be higher than mid-rank, but his defense is basically high-rank. He won't be easy to kill.'

Damien spread his awareness with a trace of concern in his eyes.

At the same time, he twisted his body impossibly and evaded the war hammer slamming down towards his head.

'Just this one fatty is so powerful already, yet there are over a thousand of these guys...?'

He sighed with emotion as he realized it.

'This is going to be a long ass hour.'

His fist swung forward, colliding with the fatty's. A shockwave spread, killing any Lesser Nox around them.

'Right, before I worry about anything else, I should take him out first.'

This would be the first battle of hundreds, thousands, or maybe even millions.

This would be the first battle of that terrifying hour that would follow.

With so much hanging on the results of this battle, Damien couldn't just let himself get stood up, could he?

A battle-hungry smile crept onto his face for the first time in many, many years.

The world became shadow. Light and dark interlaced and created something new, something capable of encompassing everything, consuming everything.

It wasn't just darkness that couldn't exist without light, it wasn't just light that could only exist within the darkness, it was a "shadow" that was created to combine the advantages of both sides.

However, this shadow seemed incomplete.

The "darkness" was saturated to the maximum. It was the blackest of blacks, the most convoluted darkness that could drive one insane by merely glimpsing it.

However, what was the cause of this lacking "light?"

Zara wondered earnestly as she made full use of the enchanting darkness around her.

Her every step was the cause of thousands of deaths, her every breath tormenting the souls of the deceased.

As for the remains of those who fell?

Before they could even attempt to combine into a greater being, they were swallowed by the darkness, becoming one with it.

'Becoming one with my legion is the best fate for your kind.'

Zara turned her gaze. Her golden eyes shone like gems as she focused her attention on a nearby being.

Strong.

Stronger than anything she'd ever faced.

But not as strong as Damien.

'The perfect practice dummy.' Zara thought to herself.

She couldn't understand it.

Just why couldn't the "light" ever form true duality with the "darkness" within her domain?

She thought long and hard without ascertaining anything.

It was almost as if her thoughts were being "restricted."

But just as someone very dear to her would always say...

The best way to improve was through practical experience.