

Void 781

Chapter 781 Explosion [3]

The warzone around Throh was tens or even hundreds of times worse than that of Calypto.

XIU! XIU! XIU!

BANG! BANG!

BOOOOOOOOOOM!

Countless sounds rang out, most having unknown origins, but one thing was certain. Each and every sound signaled the death of another soldier.

Black ink formed a river in the starry sky. The blood of men interweaved with it and created a horrid scenery.

"Team 1, reporting!"

"Team 2, reporting!"

"Team 3, reporting!"

Three squads of fighter ships, each containing roughly fifty members, rushed into the fray. Their weapons were already hot, and the second the enemy entered their sight, they fired without mercy.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Countless enemy ships exploded under their assault. They flew in perfect formation, each squad working to reinforce their counterparts, forming a system that was unbreakable without sufficient preparation.

However, these squads weren't present to kill at the moment.

"What's the ETA?!" Squad 1's Leader shouted into the intercom.

"Unknown! We don't have visuals on the ship, but it should be arriving any moment!" A reply came through.

"Roger! Let's continue clearing out the Nox in the vicinity! We can't allow the plan to be disrupted!"

""Copy!""

The squads split into their three individual parts and moved in different directions.

They weren't even a portion of the current forces. As they separated, they disappeared into the countless concurrent battlefields existing in the vicinity of Throh.

Countless Nox and countless Heaven's Army troops congregated and fought bloody battles. Everywhere one looked, there was only death.

OOOOOOOOOOOM!

A distant sound reverberated deeply through space. It shook the internals of those it passed through, giving them a slight idea of that entity's power.

"It's here!"

Squad 1's Leader, Sherya, the same green-skinned woman who realized Aaliyah's intent previously, shouted the second she heard the sound.

"All squads enter formation! Relay the information to nearby forces and move them as needed! We need to hold back the Nox and make sure that ship isn't allowed to do any damage!"

Aaliyah's goal in waiting was evidently to strike the greatest blow possible. This didn't just mean killing Thaddeus Church and destroying the destroyer ship, but also eliminating a large portion of the Nox's forces in the area.

In normal circumstances, the best strategy would be to fake their bloodlust and withdraw after gathering the Nox in a single area so Aaliyah could enact her plan perfectly.

However, Aaliyah couldn't die.

'We have to clear the area so the ship won't be able to enter with an attack. After that, we can slowly herd the Nox over. But if I want to save Aaliyah...'

Saving Aaliyah wasn't a matter of what happened before she destroyed the ship, but what happened after. Her body would be consumed by the proceeding explosion and she'd die instantly if things were left alone.

To prevent this required an equal amount of courage and insanity.

Minutes passed as Sherya and the rest organized the battlefield. They accumulated as many forces as they could and worked with precision, taking control over the battle's momentum.

Still, this wasn't an easy task. Ships exploded into clouds of flame often, and those who eventually became brothers and sisters over time were forced to accept the losses of their family members.

They fought because they understood the importance of this war.

They fought because they didn't want their children and grandchildren to be born in a time when the entire universe was under the threat of extinction.

They wanted to build a new world with their own hands.

And for that, they fought without regard for death.

Their vigor infected those around them, and the amount of Heaven's Army troops in the surroundings grew until an entire army was following Sherya's orders.

They worked ceaselessly, and eventually, a massive starship's form began to reveal itself in the distance.

It was massive. It was a planetary threat for a reason. Compared to the size of the regular fighter ships that were most prevalent in the area at the moment, the star destroyer was an elephant amongst ants.

From within, Thaddeus gazed down at the war taking place beneath him.

"Pathetic."

A single word was uttered from his mouth.

"Hahaha, I know, right?! Look at those pathetic ants trying to struggle. It's hilarious!"

"Kekeke, they're so weak! So weak and pathetic!"

The goons behind him made their own interpretations of his words, but naturally, none of them were even close to his intent.

The war itself, that was pathetic.

The conqueror's urge that created these situations in the first place, that was pathetic.

'I will extract the World Core and then leave. Though, I might as well eliminate these soldiers so Father won't be disappointed.'

With a sigh, Thaddeus sent inputs into the ship's systems with utter precision.

The weaponry on the exterior immediately whirred to life.

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The sound of cannon fire was too loud to be ignored.

"Scatter! Begin Phase 2 of the plan!" Sherya shouted without hesitation.

The tens of thousands of Heaven's Army starships under her command scattered like rats. They spiraled through the starry sky in random patterns completely leaving the beam attack's area of effect.

XIUUUU!

Space cracked like glass as the beam passed through it, but the same beam continuously impacted nothing as it moved.

Sherya was prepared for this opening attack from the very beginning. She'd been moving her troops in such a way that they could easily avoid it from the beginning.

'The hard part comes now.'

"Tiger Squad, take the units under you to the third position! Sun Squad, take your forces to the sixteenth position! Remember your roles and don't deviate, or else we'll all die!"

"Affirmative!"

Sherya's authority had long been established. The squads she commanded didn't even question her as she directed them.

"Squad 3, watch out for cannon fire!!

Squad 3 shifted their position on her order and narrowly avoided a rain of cannon fire that passed by their position.

As the star destroyer's smaller weapons began to fire, terrifying mana projectiles fell like a torrent of rain upon every being present underneath it.

"Squad 2, take the Wind Lightning Sect and its subsidiaries to attack the star destroyer! You don't need to do damage, you just need to provide a distraction!"

"Yes, Captain!"

"Beta Squad, take advantage of the diversion and aim for those smaller weapons! If we can destroy them, we can take away a large portion of the star destroyer's power!"

Another group of starships flew out.

Squad 2 and the Wind Lightning Sect kept themselves in front of the star destroyer, clearly within its commander's vision.

Taunting was one thing, but in a situation like this, more extreme measures were necessary.

The units under Squad 2 barraged the star destroyer's hull with various attacks, some even exiting their starships entirely to use their personal mana and force.

Elemental attacks flew through the starry sky along with the beaming mana of starships. The entire area in front of the star destroyer was alit with splendor.

At the same time, Beta Squad snaked along the star destroyer's side, slowly making their way up until they reached the secondary weapons that lined the starship's sides.

The operation, as of now, was going without a hitch.

And Aaliyah could only dazedly watch it all from within her little hiding spot in the star destroyer's control room.

Chapter 782 Explosion [4]

'This...is not how things were supposed to go!'

Aaliyah was in a mild state of panic at the strange situation that was taking place. The sheer amount of reinforcements present shouldn't have been possible considering the way Heaven's Army's forces were spread.

That is, unless someone with enough authority called for it.

'Sherya!'

Aaliyah knew exactly who it was. There was only one person in the world who understood her deeply enough to completely understand her intent off only a few clues.

'You were supposed to lead everyone away, not bring them to help...!'

Aaliyah almost wanted to cry. How was she supposed to take down the starship if countless important allies had to be sacrificed as well?!

Despite the determination she built to accept any sacrifice to accomplish her goals, Sherya's presence changed things.

Sherya was one of the few people who couldn't be allowed to die.

Aaliyah was forced to wait without being able to do anything else. She was forced to watch the proceedings outside from the same perspective as those Higher Nox in the command center.

As she watched, she saw the utter cohesion that Heaven's Army possessed in this moment. She saw how they flawlessly executed their plan even when their troops were falling at an astronomical rate.

"Focus on those few in the back. It looks like their entire formation is revolving around them."

Thaddeus' voice suddenly rang out.

Aaliyah's eyes widened.

'No...!'

A beam of light shot from the star destroyer and cleaved through the universe, unobstructed as it moved towards its targets.

Aaliyah was on the verge of fainting. If those were the leaders of the operation, wasn't that where Sherya was?!

But unlike Aaliyah's dread, Sherya had a wide smile on her face.

"Perfect! Everyone prep for impact and get ready! Everything comes together here!"

Her plan was never intricate and detailed. There were never a great deal of misdirections and steps for them to succeed.

After all, she didn't even have a few minutes to formulate the plan.

It was, at its core, a simple combination of distraction and herding.

The distraction had been taken care of.

Beta Squad flew around the star destroyer and targeted its weapons. Even as they lost half of their forces in this endeavor, they continued without hesitation.

Squad 2 and the Wind Lightning Sect were also still in the star destroyer's general vicinity, but the second the beam fired, they fled the central position they formerly occupied.

As she faced the beam of light about to hit her, Sherya's eyes were more serious than ever before.

The distraction wouldn't have been a distraction if it was done pointlessly.

Naturally, something was being covered up.

The blinding white light of the mana beam covered hundreds of kilometers as it grew in size. It was impossible for anyone to see in this atmosphere.

"Now!"

But sight was secondary.

Sherya gave her command.

Immediately, countless starships appeared over the horizon, chased by a horde of Lesser Nox and a large number of Higher Nox in starships as well.

When these starships appeared, Sherya slammed down on a button on her control panel.

A thick mana barrier appeared around her starship, and soon after, the starships of those around her.

Space around the star destroyer was lit up with blue light as countless barriers were deployed.

And as soon as they all appeared in reality, they connected and formed a massive planet-sized dome that encompassed the star destroyer and the Nox that'd been herded over.

AALIYAH!

NOW!

The bellow was so loud that it almost felt unreal. It eclipsed the star destroyer's beam attack, the roaring of starships all around, and all other sounds present on the battlefield...

...just to enter the ears of a single person.

A spark was lit.

Thaddeus' eyes widened.

He felt a fluctuation behind him. His hand immediately shot out. His mana formed a thick chain that stabbed into the ceiling.

But it was already too late,

Blood spurted from the ceiling, and Aaliyah's figure was revealed there.

With a line of black mana impaling her stomach, she grinned a bloody grin.

"May you never be reborn."

Crash!

She crushed the ball of mana that'd formed in her hand.

Countless seeds reacted all around the starship and bloomed.

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Gigantic vines tore through the starship's systems as the seeds bloomed. The vines thrashed wildly and ripped apart anything nearby, and at the same time, they actively searched for their brethren to combine into one.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

The vines took the most efficient paths to connect. They sundered the starship from the inside, and as more and more vines connected, they became thicker and more impervious to the starship's defenses.

"DAMMIT!" Thaddeus roared. Countless flashing red lights appeared on the holographic screen before him as the ship's systems began to fail.

The vines continued to grow. Aaliyah lay in a pool of blood where Thaddeus left her to die, her fingers ever so slightly twitching.

Every twitch held untold significance.

The seeds Aaliyah planted weren't all the same.

They were all the same species, but each seed would grow into a specimen with different abilities than the last.

It was a chaotic combination of powers that only someone as in tune with nature as the Plant Races could handle.

And under Aaliyah's control, these seeds could show their full potential.

OOOOOOOOOOM!

Sixteen seeds combined into one, forming a sentient behemoth beast that frenziedly attacked the starship.

In another location, 34 seeds combined into a raging flame vine that spread deathly fire through the starship and utterly ruined its interior.

There were countless unimaginable effects that could be produced if these vines were manipulated correctly.

But Aaliyah only cared about one.

'Expand.'

It was a moment that cut through the silence.

In the outside world, the mana light beam was just about to land.

And at the same time that massive beam impacted the territory barrier formed by the countless Heaven's Army starships...

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

BAAAAANG!

Mountain-sized vines burst through the starship's hull.

Vines tore the starship into pieces as they forced their way out of it. They wrapped around the starship and held it together like gift wrapping.

It was like a scene of nature overrunning modern infrastructure.

Sherya's eyes widened.

"GODSPEED, NOW!"

'Explode.'

The vines turned red in an instant.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The explosion trumped any other. The fabric of reality quaked from its force. Titanic shockwaves spread into the surroundings and immediately shattered the territory barrier around the starship.

Ahhhhh!

Screams were the most common sound as the starships were torn apart, their pilots flung into the starry sky.

But more than these pilots...

Those pilots who herded the Nox into the center of the territory barrier, as well as the Nox they herded...

Were incinerated within a second.

They were erased from existence during the initial explosion alone.

However, the spectacle wasn't over.

The massive star destroyer was subject to countless chain explosions. Rubble was exploded into even smaller pieces, and any integral piece of the starship turned into a nuclear bomb that could kill millions with its blast radius.

The only part of the starship that remained safe was one.

A black cocoon of energy surrounded the control room as it was barraged with explosive force.

Within, Thaddeus Church clutched a pendant that hung from his neck and spit out the blood that was pooling in his mouth.

His icy gaze remained on the only other being within the room with him.

The killing intent he emitted was perhaps even more terrifying for Aaliyah than the explosions taking place outside.

Chapter 783 Turning Point [1]

A rumbling as if a planet was exploding.

A powerful force that slammed through space.

And heat, unbearable heat,

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The structure of the starship collapsed along with the explosion, and Thaddeus was immediately pulled by the immense suction force of the explosion.

"Khhh...!"

He gritted his teeth and endured the pressure as best as he could, but it wasn't enough. He could only helplessly endure as his body was thrown into the walls of the starship.

Bang!

Crack!

His back hit an exposed beam and his spine cracked. A series of whooshes passed him as the rest who weren't so lucky met their tragic fates.

The explosion swallowed them.

Their bodies were incinerated. Their flesh and bones were seared away brutally, and even the black ink they transformed into evaporated into nothingness.

In that final moment before Thaddeus could join them, the protective charm left to him by his father activated, and a thick barrier enveloped the entire control room, protecting him.

He understood why he survived, but why did she?

Thaddeus stared at the woman in front of him with powerful killing intent in his eyes.

"It was your fault!" He shouted.

"If it wasn't for you, the ship wouldn't have been destroyed and my exploration wouldn't have been ruined! How dare you?!"

"Keuk...!"

Aaliyah coughed out a mouthful of blood and smiled wryly.

"I wasn't so sure of it after seeing how you interact amongst yourselves, but you really have no consideration for human life. I stopped you from massacring countless innocents for no reason. Is that such a crime?"

She held the wound in her stomach and shakily stood up.

Even she didn't know why she'd survived, but as long as she was alive, she'd do everything she could to fight.

"What value does human life have?!" Thaddeus roared back in response.

"You're weak existences who can't even stand invasion from outsiders! You're broken from the inside and corrupted thoroughly, you lie and backstab, you feel emotion that skews your rational thought! How can you call yourselves worthy of value?!"

"Spoiled brat."

"What?!"

Aaliyah couldn't hold herself back from scoffing after hearing Thaddeus' speech.

"I called you a spoiled brat. Isn't that all you are? You look down on others because you can't understand them, you complain about unimportant things as if your life would suddenly become worse without them, you're a hypocritical bastard who criticizes others without even looking at your own flaws. If you aren't a spoiled brat, what else could you be?"

"Khh..."

Thaddeus wanted to respond, but his words were stuck in his throat.

'Is that...how others perceive me?'

The roaring of explosions was the only sound in the area for many minutes.

Thaddeus sat down on the ruined floor of the control room and fell into thought.

Aaliyah knew she had an opportunity to kill him. He wasn't paying her any mind, and he was a vile person who deserved death no matter what.

But...

She couldn't bring herself to do it.

'Is he...self-reflecting?'

It was honestly something she never expected the Nox to be able to do. Considering how they always acted belligerently without remorse, Aaliyah didn't think the concept of a conscience existed within them.

Seeing Thaddeus ruminate over her sharp words, she couldn't help but wait to see the outcome.

Just as she expected, Thaddeus was truly reflecting on her words.

In any regular situation, he'd never have done so. Even if it was his own father reprimanding him, Thaddeus would show resistance if he didn't agree with what was being said.

But this wasn't an ordinary situation, and Aaliyah wasn't an ordinary person.

Somehow, she'd survived that explosion with no new wounds. Thaddeus saw it briefly out of the corner of his eyes, "something" brushed through the control room at the same instant the explosion happened, and that "something" gave Aaliyah the means to survive.

But even if she was aided by an external force, just the fact that she had the fate to be trapped with him in this isolated space where none could interfere held immense significance to Thaddeus.

'Nobody has ever dared to talk to me like that.'

The people who surrounded him were always either trying to kill him or curry favor with him. Meeting Aaliyah was his first experience with someone who could scold him without fear.

'Are all humans like this?'

Thaddeus thought back to his actions in the past.

'Hypocritical bastard, she says...?'

It was true. Most of the flaws he listed for humanity, didn't the Nox possess them in far greater quantities?

His own race was disgusting, this was a thought he'd had since young. Thaddeus had never enjoyed the Nox's way of life, nor did he support their methods.

He simply grew indifferent because his hatred became too deep.

To cope with it, he unloaded it on those ants he met during the war.

He looked back up at Aaliyah, breaking away from the depressing chain of thought that was forming in his mind.

"I really want to kill you." He muttered.

"If you try, I'll fight back until the end," Aaliyah responded confidently.

"Hmph."

Thaddeus smirked at her words.

It was calm.

Despite the roaring of explosions that didn't seem to want to quiet down outside the barrier, despite the intense war that was taking place even further out than that explosion, Thaddeus felt peace.

"You're a strange woman. You recognize me as an enemy, yet you refuse to act. You've had every chance to kill me in the past few minutes, but you didn't take a single one. What is your intent?"

"U-um...I...just felt like it?" Aaliyah responded in confusion.

Even she didn't know why she didn't kill Thaddeus. To this moment, the desire in her mind wasn't to kill, but to fix.

'He's different from the rest of them.'

Thaddeus was indifferent to all things, but he had a hint of curiosity in him that overrode his personality entirely. He was a Nox with many of the disgusting personality traits of a Nox, but he also had a human side that Aaliyah couldn't help but see after observing him for so long.

Her hatred for the man would never vanish. He would always be the man who massacred universe denizens like nothing without even a single hint of motive.

But sacrifices...were necessary.

When it came to indifference to the deaths of others, Aaliyah couldn't even blame Thaddeus. This same atmosphere was possessed by nearly every expert in the universe.

If she could help him understand what the universe was like, if she could help him understand morality, wouldn't humanity gain a crucial ally?

This Thaddeus character was a gamble for Aaliyah. If she went all in to follow her instinct, she'd either gain a powerful ally or invite a wolf into the sheep's den.

Her hands trembled as she watched the man try to rationalize her words.

Her heart thumped.

'Death is mercy. If I can help him learn sympathy, and he feels the guilt and burden on his shoulders...'

That would be the best punishment for him, and the best vengeance for the fallen.

Giving a man who didn't flinch in the face of pain and death those two things was meaningless. The joy caused by his death would fade and be replaced with a hollow emptiness soon enough.

To reform the pitiful soul she saw in front of her, and to provide the ultimate retribution for the fallen...

Aaliyah made a choice.

Chapter 784 Turning Point [2]

"Thaddeus Church..." Aaliyah blurted out.

Thaddeus' head shot up, his eyes locked on her.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to come with me!"

"What?"

This confusing woman only continued to confuse him further with every second. What was she even talking about?

Aaliyah gritted her teeth and endured his judgmental gaze. "Come with me! Let's leave the battlefield! I want to show you around our beautiful Grand Heavens Boundary!"

Thaddeus' eyes widened. He expected her to say something stupid, but he didn't expect it to be so utterly incomprehensible.

"You want me, a Nox, to join you, a Plant Race, to explore the universe that my kind is trying to destroy?"

He reiterated it in case she didn't realize what her words meant, but he was met with disappointment.

"I know what I said, and I mean it."

"You are mentally insane."

"Is there another type of insanity?"

"You're a truly annoying woman."

"Fufu! That just means I've defeated you with my charms!"

Thaddeus sighed as he glanced away from Aaliyah's bubbly person.

'What is she doing? Where did this even come from? Is she trying to lure me into a trap? Where is the setup?'

Thaddeus' thoughts raced. He tried to rationalize Aaliyah's proposal to no avail whatsoever.

"Explain in detail. I cannot understand your perverted thought process."

"I'm not a pervert!"

"Only a masochist would think to invite the enemy into their homebase for tourism."

"I'm not a masochist either!"

Aaliyah's face turned red in embarrassment. She was barely able to understand her own thoughts, and now she was being told to voice them?

'Calm down and concentrate.' She told herself.

It took almost an entire minute for Aaliyah to calm down and organize her thoughts. The entire time, Thaddeus quietly waited without moving a single step.

"You look lonely."

They were the first words out of Aaliyah's mouth.

Thaddeus glared at her fiercely, and while she did jump, she refused to back down.

"I watched you from when you first entered the control room until now, and I can't help but think you're different from the rest of your kind. You have emotions they don't possess, and rationality that goes against their belligerence. Also, I can see it, you know? You're trying so hard, but your curiosity is written all over your face."

"If you want to say yes, then just say yes! There's no need to be a tsundere."

"Tsundere?"

"Ah, That's a human thing. Don't worry about it."

"The fact that you won't tell me what it means makes me dislike it automatically."

"That's probably the right response from you, Mr. Stoic."

"Hm?"

"Nothing! I didn't say anything."

"Tch."

Thaddeus turned away.

'What is this heat in my face.'

He was turning red unknowingly, and he didn't enjoy the feeling at all.

Still...

'Escape...'

Not just escape from the warzone, but escape from his father, escape from responsibilities, escape from the Nox as a whole...

It was too damn appealing.

'Grand Heavens Boundary, why are the experts so obsessed with this universe? What importance do World Cores hold? Is the universe truly as beautiful as the rumors? Without all this desolation spread through it, is this place truly a heavenly training land as the people describe it?'

His curiosity overflowed with the growth of his interest.

He lifted his head to look at the beautiful green-skinned woman holding her hand out to him.

She was different from the women he usually saw. Women of the Nox were usually extremely seductive and dominant, but Aaliyah was the complete opposite of that.

She was cute, bubbly, and even a little innocent.

Her entire existence confused Thaddeus, who'd never experienced such a positive personality before.

His eyes went to her hand and back to her face.

His heart beat violently as if it wanted to burst out of his chest.

It was a suffocating feeling.

But for some reason, from this single interaction, this strange woman had hooked him.

He was curious about her and the world that produced someone like her.

He wanted to see it.

And he wanted to escape the suffocating constraints of his identity.

'I am trying to find reasons to deny her, but my decision was made long ago, wasn't it? How troublesome.'

Thaddeus reached out slowly.

His hand latched onto the one outstretched to him.

Understanding these strange beings that opposed the Nox was something he'd wanted to do for a very long time.

He stood up with Aaliyah's support.

"You don't hate me?"

"Of course I do. You massacred so many people without reason. Why wouldn't I hate you?"

"Then...?"

"Can I not feel sympathetic for someone I hate?"

"I really can't understand you."

"As it should be!"

Aaliyah suddenly frowned.

"But...getting you out of here without being noticed will be hard..."

The duo's attention returned to their overall situation. They'd been so enveloped in each other that they didn't even realize the sound of explosions growing louder.

"The charm can't hold out for much longer."

The shield was already cracking. It wouldn't be long before they were exposed to the terror of the outside world.

But Aaliyah wasn't worried. Rather, she was excited.

'If I can get him out, I'll be the first person to ever turn a Nox into an ally!'

The task ahead fit her far better than a traumatic warzone. She needed peace, especially after all the trauma Thaddeus himself had given her.

Honestly, she still had the urge to kill him. She still wanted him to suffer as much as possible.

But she held it in and let it be suppressed by the other most prominent urge in her body.

It was the urge to help.

If her outstretching her hand could change the trajectory of someone's life for the better...

She'd do it, regardless of that person's identity.

After all, wasn't that just who she was?

Aaliyah smiled to herself,

'Sherya is really going to hate me for this one.'

While the starship's destruction was relatively quick due to Aaliyah's patience and Sherya's planning, its aftereffects were huge, both literally and metaphorically.

In the literal sense, the explosive cloud created by the destroyed starship didn't settle down even after many minutes, and the explosion only seemed to get stronger with every passing second. It fed on the complex structures and mana storages of the former star destroyer to become an uncontrollable behemoth.

But the metaphorical effects of the starship's death were even more terrifying than the all-consuming explosion.

The star destroyer was the Nox's only usable Demigod-level force in the universe.

It was their greatest advantage, and their greatest siege weapon.

With it gone, not only would the current battle for Throh proceed faster as one of its primary objectives was accomplished, the Nox's future attempts to take over other Sectors would be far more bearable.

The Nox invasion had effectively been slowed down considerably.

Word spread rapidly through various channels, reaching the ears of, the forces keeping Plaguelord in check, the Calypto battlefield, and even those ruling authorities of the universe.

The destruction of the star destroyer sent one message blaring across the universe.

From now on...

It was time for a counterattack.

Chapter 785 Final Stand [1]

Two figures flitted through space at their greatest speeds, almost matching each other as they shot through Calypto's atmosphere.

If they hadn't seen each other in the starry sky before entering the planet, they wouldn't have been able to see each other at all due to the distance between them.

When they touched ground, they were on opposite sides of the world.

But it didn't matter.

The second they landed, they both plunged into the nearby sea and made beelines towards a single target.

In the middle of the sea, there was a section of chaotic whirlpools where the seawater was heavily disrupted. There was a massive chasm separating the seas as if a scene from a holy scripture, and within stood a single man.

Pitch-black wisps of mana swarmed around him like dancing fairies, giving off a strange and eerie sense of beauty. The playful behavior of these fairies completely contradicted the actions of the mana they represented.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The aftereffects of Damien's interference in the World's structure became more evident with every passing second. Underwater volcanos erupted due to the shifting tectonic plates, and heaven-reaching tsunamis spread in every direction with Damien as their center.

This chaos was mirrored in the World Core Space.

As Damien's interference continued, the World Core's fundamental properties shifted. The pure mana that originally formulated the core began to fight alongside him, clashing with the murky Nox Mana that had possessed its form.

A secondary clash took place between these two forces, and frankly, without Damien's careful aid, their battle for dominance would've torn the entire world in two.

'Fuck!'

When he first started, Damien never expected things to be like this. He obviously understood that changing the World Core's properties wouldn't be a smooth process, but to think it would be so violent...

'Even I wasn't prepared to hold an entire world together with my power!'

Mediating the struggle between two extremely powerful forces while protecting the world's foundational laws so it wouldn't collapse entirely was almost impossible. If Damien didn't have a myriad of skills as a Celestial, as well as immense mental strength gathered through various trials, he would've never been able to hold on for as long as he had.

However...

"BLIGHT EMPEROR!"

09:19

'They're coming.'

His eyes sharpened.

Above his head, the air was sundered into nothingness and space shattered.

BOOOOOOOM!

The resulting explosion was delayed. The impact was too fast.

"BLIGHT EMPEROR!"

"Hahaha! Another interesting one has come!"

Two booming voices resounded one after another. Standing opposite each other with Damien at their center were two domineering men whose combined presence would cause 90% of life in the existing universe to tremble beneath their feet.

On one side was a grey-skinned fiend with piercing snake eyes. His long hair fluttered in the wind, and though his body was lean, the power emanating from his every fiber was not to be underestimated.

On the other was a man who looked far more average. He didn't have any sort of kingly demeanor or aura, but he gave off a staunch and stalwart impression that made people automatically trust him. It was a completely different kind of charisma.

These two glared at each other fiercely, but after their first greeting, they looked away and ignored each other.

They'd come for one man, after all.

"We finally meet in person, young human." The Saint Emperor said with a smile.

Damien looked up in the air at the Emperor and rolled his eyes in disgust.

"I expected the guy who's been giving me so much trouble to be at least somewhat domineering, but you're just another chuuni cultivator. What a disappointment."

"Your mouth has gotten worse since our first meeting. Now that I'm here in person, do you think I would allow you to spout nonsense so freely?"

The Saint Emperor's eyes turned cold. A wave of power shot from his body towards Damien, but someone got in the way before it could strike him.

"Now, now. For an Emperor, aren't you a little trigger-happy? If you came to have a conversation with our little friend, then do it properly."

The Commander spoke with a grin on his face. He wasn't originally this type of person, but after seeing how the Blight Emperor conversed with Damien, he decided to try a more roguish approach than his usual demeanor.

It was strange, but it was fun. It made him feel young again to insult someone with such authority without care.

Damien grinned at the commander who was exploring his youth. "Old man, you're a good one. Help me hold that bastard off until I finish what I'm doing. Trust me, he'll only get angrier the longer he can't touch me."

"You're an interesting cadet, you know that? None have ever dared to act as you do on this cruel battlefield."

"That's just because they're too weak."

"Hahahaha! Indeed, Heaven's Army is a batch of weaklings! Why don't you join our side instead?"

Damien sent a deadpan stare at the Saint Emperor. "What kind of idiocy are you spouting?"

"Is it truly idiocy? I merely wish to recruit a promising seedling to a place where he can be properly nurtured. After all, don't we both have things that the other person desires?"

Damien's gaze turned cold. The longer he entertained this conversation, the harder it became to keep the world intact.

He was acting fine on the outside, but his mind was in utter chaos trying to manage every task he was trying to accomplish at once.

Perhaps even he himself couldn't process the grandiosity of what he was trying to achieve.

"Old man, how long can you hold him off for?" Damien asked through sound transmission.

"Realistically, I can keep him occupied for as long as necessary. But to do so while minding the environmental damage is far harder. I can at most mitigate damage for 15 minutes before I'm forced to use more devastating attacks." The Commander responded.

'15 minutes...'

"It's enough."

Damien hardened his gaze.

To completely shift the World Core in 15 minutes was impossible, but if it was just taking control of half so that the Saint Emperor's domination would be affected...

'Good, we just need to weaken his Avatar. He definitely won't want to take a backseat in the war for the next few years, so he'll retreat as long as his advantage is taken away.'

By the time Damien returned his attention to reality, the battle between the two experts had already begun.

The air above was submerged in the same chaos as the sea and world below.

'This'll be my first time watching a clash of this level, right...?' Damien thought to himself.

He'd seen even Demigods fighting with his own eyes, but he'd never seen an intricate single combat match between them where they displayed the height of their Laws.

Something like that...

Wasn't it the best sustenance for his growth?

His eyes gleamed like a predator that locked onto its prey.

15 more minutes until this entire damn battle was over.

15 more minutes until he could finally relax and tie up all the loose ends that'd been piling up due to the battlefield's constant state of disorder.

'The objective is simply too easy this time. This battle...has basically already been declared our victory.'

Chapter 786 Final Stand [2]

"Park Jinho, it has been a long time since we last met."

"Not long enough in my opinion. If I could go my entire life without seeing you once, I would be content."

"Don't be like that. Aren't we practically brothers after all the times we've fought until this point?"

"I would never form brotherhood with a demon like you."

While Damien was stuck in thought on the ground, the Saint Emperor and the Commander conversed.

In truth, neither of them wanted to have this conversation, but they were forced by the circumstance.

The first to move would be the one to lose.

But at the same time, the Saint Emperor couldn't afford to stay still.

'The situation is getting dangerous. There is no merit in staying past my welcome if that boy is able to complete his convoluted endeavor.'

Calypto's World Core needed to be saved, but his life was more important. At the end of the day, he was still an Emperor, and regardless of what happened, the repercussions he faced wouldn't be too harsh.

'Nevertheless, I must at least put in some effort. If I am able to reach the boy before he reaches the most critical landmark, the mission can still be said to be accomplished.'

While Park Jinho was stalling for time, the Saint Emperor was taking time to himself to think.

What was the most ideal path forward from this point?

Or rather...

'Which path will make this war more interesting...?'

The Saint Emperor already knew the answer.

"...this is why I've always hated you the most. That disgusting snake-like personality of yours is truly the worst."

The Saint Emperor returned his attention to Park Jinho who'd just finished speaking and sighed.

"I'm tired of this. I can't believe I stooped so low as to entertain the conversations of ants."

He didn't need more time to understand what he wanted.

The Saint Emperor placed his hand in the air and pushed forward.

'Execution Ring.'

The inky black mana emitted from his body was different from that of other Nox.

Unlike them, he truly explored its properties.

Corrosion? That wasn't a property of Nox Mana, but a side effect.

After all, Nox Mana was merely...

A pathway of black light formed between Park Jinho and the Saint Emperor. Once it enveloped them, it spread in all directions until multiple hundreds of kilometers were encased in a thick tinted glass-like dome.

"This is an entertaining ability that I rarely use. Until you die or I release the barrier, nobody can leave. Won't that make our match more amusing?"

"I can't expect anything more from scum like you."

Park Jinho's eyes were solemn. Not only were the two of them enveloped in the life-or-death arena, Damien was as well.

And with such limited space...

'Protecting him just became much harder.'

'Path Extinction.'

Park Jinho wasn't allowed to entertain his thoughts for very long. A beam of black light shot through the air and exterminated anything in its path as it rushed towards him.

It was in front of his eyes before he could even process it.

'Flex Shield: Maximum Capacity!'

A hastily constructed shield of water appeared before Park Jinho. The black light beam impacted it, and despite the water's seeming weakness, it held up perfectly against the assault.

"I see you have reached the stage of altering your element! Not bad!"

The Saint Emperor grinned as he flew through the air. His hands moved slowly, but every ounce of their movement seemed to contain endless profundities.

'Collapsing Darkness.'

It was a move that represented the relationship between light and darkness. Without the presence of light...

Darkness collapsed on itself and multiplied.

A wave of black energy appeared and charged forth like a tsunami. Its form was basic, but Park Jinho could clearly feel the energy of extermination within.

'His Laws are convoluted. He can mimic the properties of other Laws within his own, but the foundation will always be Death Laws.'

Death Laws were powerful, but extremely hard to develop. People with affinity towards them were disregarded in their growth stage, but if they managed to reach maturity...

'15 minutes will be difficult.'

Park Jinho gathered his mana and drew a pair of twin swords from his spatial ring.

'Separation of Heaven and Earth.'

Thick streams of strangely blue water swirled around the twin swords as Park Jinho dashed forward. His body twisted in a lithe manner that didn't match his figure at all, but somehow, he was able to cut through the air like an experienced dancer and weave through the Saint Emperor's deathly attack.

His swords slashed out with fury. The strange water coating the blades created arcs through the air that didn't disappear for many seconds, and even when they did, the water's aura remained.

Bang!

Park Jinho made first contact with the Saint Emperor. His blades slashed into the latter's skin, but were stopped before making too much progress.

"You think a weak attack like that will stop me?"

The Saint Emperor pulled his fist back and let off a punch like cannon fire. The atmosphere boomed from his speed, and roared even louder upon impact.

BANG!

Park Jinho was sent flying with an indent in his face, but his eyes never closed. Even though his assault failed, he was able to garner a good amount of information from the exchange.

'First off, close combat is his specialty.'

Park Jinho swerved his body and avoided the Saint Emperor's meteoric falling punch. He slashed his blades out to meet the man's fists, creating a sound like metal clashing against metal as they flew apart.

'Secondly, his Laws are geared towards extermination.'

But for Park Jinho and Damien, this was a fight for survival.

09:21

"You don't have the luxury to split your attention. Focus on me if you wish to keep your Avatar in one. If even a single strand of that mana was allowed to run free in his body, Park Jinho would be incinerated. He needed to exercise the utmost caution as he fought, making sure to expel any intruding mana in his body even as he focused on the battle.

Strange blue water collected in the air and manifested into multiple projectiles. They shot at the Saint Emperor like a swarm of locusts, restraining his movements severely.

Park Jinho's eyes sharpened. His body twirled through the barrage of water projectiles and hid between the lines, approaching the Saint Emperor stealthily.

He was able to reach the enemy's flank within an instant.

'And thirdly...'

His blades struck out, but they didn't aim for the Saint Emperor at all.

Streams of mana raced through the atmosphere, and halfway through their descent to the earth, they clashed with an invisible force.

'He was never aiming for me.'

The point of collision was only a few meters away from Damien's head.

If that invisible force was allowed free reign, the young genius would already be dead, or the planet Calypto would be collapsed.

"Tch. You were able to figure it out so quickly. I should expect it from someone of your caliber though, shouldn't I?"

The Saint Emperor smilingly replied as if the entire ongoing battle was a joke to him.

And it might as well have been.

The Saint Emperor was a Demigod using an Avatar. Any fight against a lower existence was merely entertainment for him.

But for Park Jinho and Damien, this was a fight for survival.

"You don't have the luxury to split your attention. Focus on me if you wish to keep your Avatar in one piece."

Park Jinho spoke coldly as he flashed his blades.

15 minutes...

15 minutes was starting to seem a lot longer than it usually was.

As for Damien...

He was really starting to hate countdowns.

Chapter 787 Final Stand [3]

Damien was in a predicament at the moment.

On one side, there was a battle that would provide him with immense comprehension of Death Laws, and on the other was a planet that would collapse without his care and attention.

'Fuck you, universe!' Damien shouted inwardly, cursing the difficult position he was placed in.

'I mean, yeah the planet is important and all, but come on...!'

He sighed in lament as he tried to ignore the fierce fluctuations slamming into his body from above. The pain was, of course, nothing, but the desire to watch the battle was simply too strong!

'Damn Calypto, if you don't want to lose my interest, keep me occupied! I'm the table in this relationship!'

The planet answered his call. Its surface rumbled fiercely, creating worldwide earthquakes that collapsed most manmade structures on the planet. Waves of black and blue mana drilled through the core of the world, seemingly attempting to hollow it out from the inside.

'Fuck! Now is not the time to start communicating properly!'

Bam!

Damien slapped his palms deeper into the ground as if the tactile sensation would better connect him to the situation. He clenched fistfuls of rock and turned his wrists vigorously, remotely controlling the Void Mana infiltrating the World Core.

'It's really like a different world in here.'

They weren't the Mysteries of Heaven and Earth, but they weren't far off. Like minimized fragments of the universal law, strands of Law floated aimlessly through the slowly reforming World Core.

'These are the foundational laws of the world, a microcosm that mirrors the universe's overall set of laws.'

Damien was generally knowledgeable about the universe at a conceptual level. Rather than reality, he had spent far more time interacting with such concepts.

His consciousness was unconsciously pulled towards those fragments of Law.

The All-Seeing Eyes passively activated, removing the temptation the Laws emitted from Damien's system.

'Phew...' Damien sighed in relief.

'Now is not the time. Once I've bound this World Core, it won't be too late to understand its complexities.'

Damien could feel it in his soul. A World Core that was partially of his own creation...

Would be a completely different existence than a regular World Core.

As a result, the number of large-area or destructive skills being used was negligible. Instead, an 09:22

intricate battle of Laws and close combat was taking place.

5 minutes passed.

Damien's purification of the World Core was roughly 25% complete.

Above, the battle remained roughly the same as it was before.

The two experts were fighting, but neither of them desired the destruction of the terrain. Even if their reasoning was different, the end goal was the same.

As a result, the number of large-area or destructive skills being used was negligible. Instead, an intricate battle of Laws and close combat was taking place.

To parry was to create an opening, to strike was to kill.

Park Jinho had always been a swordsman who followed these rules, aiming to end every battle with at most two swings of his swords.

His body was large and stocky, but his affinities forced him to adopt a more lithe and graceful combat style.

It was an oddly contradictory sight to watch his massive body maneuvering as if it weighed nothing, but Park Jinho wasn't ashamed of his style at all.

This unconventional style was the exact skill that allowed him to reach his current position.

The amount of effort he'd put into perfecting his swordplay and basic movements was unholy.

And as a result...

'Sixty-Three Faces of Water, 16th Face: Absolute Boundary'

It was a skill usually used during large brawls, but the Saint Emperor possessed more power than any number of men combined.

Each of his punches could crush a mountain with ease, each of his kicks could split the seas. His body seemed to be made out of the universe's strongest materials with the way he never broke.

Park Jinho's twin swords began to move like water to counter this gargantuan force.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The swords moved like butterflies flitting through the air. Each of the Saint Emperor's strikes was met by a blade that expertly parried them and transferred the battle's momentum into Park Jinho's hands.

"Hahaha! How fun!" The Saint Emperor laughed wildly as he continued his assault. His fists were coated in terrifying extermination mana that threatened to kill Park Jinho whenever it came close.

Each strike wasn't just powerful, but extremely dexterous as well. Despite Park Jinho's attempts to make distance between them, the Saint Emperor's fists always managed to make their way into his blind spots to strike him.

Absolute Boundary gave the human commander the first moment of respite he'd tasted since the battle started.

But of course, he wasn't one to merely sit still and wait.

If Absolute Boundary merely deflected attacks, wasn't it too domineering to give it such a name?

Park Jinho's swords glowed with strange murky light as he continued deflecting and parrying the Saint Emperor's attacks.

The light continuously grew, and as the Saint Emperor threw a surprise kick at Park Jinho's stomach...

'Release.'

Park Jinho crossed his swords and sliced in an X, his blades aiming for the Saint Emperor's unguarded chest.

'17th Face: Weight of Water'

A fluctuation of laws covered the murky energy around the sword blades as they slashed. The energy abruptly became tens or even hundreds of times heavier, and as the swords finished their crescent arcs, the energy went flying towards its target.

SHIIIIING!

BOOOOOOOOM!

The Saint Emperor's own energy was returned to him, compressed and consolidated by the weight of an ocean. The Saint Emperor's body went flying, chunks of black gunk flying from his form.

"Haa...haa..."

Park Jinho stood silent and caught his breath. His eyes stared warily at where the Saint Emperor's body landed, waiting for the man to make another move.

'7 more min—'

"Bastard!"

Park Jinho's figure blurred and reappeared in front of Damien, slashing out and countering another stream of invisible energy that almost struck the young genius.

"Blight Emperor, you bastard! How dare you use such petty tricks?!"

"Hahaha! This battle has been my loss since its start. Why shouldn't I use any means possible to enjoy the time before I must retreat?"

"Is this a game to you?!"

"Weren't you already aware of this fact?"

"Grr!"

Park Jinho tried to charge again, but he was forced to halt immediately.

Xiu! Xiu! Xiu!

His swords cut through the air and decimated multiple invisible projectiles.

'Ranged combat? This is more advantageous for me!'

Park Jinho withdrew his swords and brought his hands together.

His swordsmanship was his best attack method, but it was far from his most effective and versatile.

When it came to battle, unless he was facing an opponent he respected, Park Jinho rarely brought out his blades.

Instead...

He used the abilities that granted him the title "Poseidon."

The seas raged outside the barrier. Even though they couldn't answer Park Jinho's calls, they showed their fervent desire to do so.

Luckily, a sea wasn't necessary for Poseidon to show his power.

He could merely conjure his own.

'Multi-cast: Barrier'

'Elemental Summoning: Aquarius'

'Sea God's Dominion'

Multiple things happened at once.

Damien and Park Jinho were covered by a thick array of barriers.

A beautiful ethereal woman appeared behind Park Jinho and wrapped her arms around his neck.

And with his hand outstretched, Park Jinho became a God of the Sea, ready to unleash his wrath onto his enemies.

Chapter 788 Final Stand [4]

In any normal circumstance, the Saint Emperor would've immediately moved out of range after sensing Park Jinho's accumulated power, but the life-or-death arena he'd set up limited him just as much as it did his opponent.

'But without this much, would there ever be a challenge?'

The Saint Emperor couldn't help but grin looking at the truly gargantuan amount of water that was being gathered.

The fact that it hadn't been mobilized yet but was still giving off such fluctuations...

'I could challenge him in close combat again, however, that is his specialty. Even if I wish to enjoy this battle, I still have a job to do.'

His eyes flicked over to the young genius kneeling on the floor behind Park Jinho.

'That boy...while I can't touch him quite yet, I at least have to leave an impression.'

He couldn't have Damien forgetting him when he met other Nox Emperors, could he?

It needed to be him.

'I want to be his nemesis.'

Because only then could he truly witness the rise of a monster, a true terror that far outstripped any mere Nox being.

'It seems I'm getting a bit overexcited.'

The treasure in front of his eyes was too captivating, but also in front of his eyes was an array of water spears with both the hardness of metal and the flexibility of water.

'How troublesome.'

The Saint Emperor frowned and swiped his arm, letting loose a swarm of strange bugs. These bugs were wholly made of mana, and when they came in contact with the water spears...

Chomp!

They devoured the spears' mana with so much vigor that their each and every bite was audible.

'I suppose it wouldn't be bad to use a speck of power here.'

'Underworld River'

The Saint Emperor outstretched his hand with his palm facing the earth. A single drop of milky grey liquid dripped from his finger.

ROOOOAAAAAR!

When it splashed against the ground, a river roared to life. Its deathly waters were filled with an aura of grudge and resentment. The river crashed through the open environment, filling the space between Park Jinho and the Saint Emperor in an instant.

'Wrath Index 4th Scripture: Tides of Moonlight'

The moon controlled the waves, but if one's power was enough, the waves could control the moon itself.

Its light would shine upon the world and become one with the sea, transforming the water into a miraculous substance that not only had supreme regenerative capabilities, but also immense density that water shouldn't possess, almost turning it into a non-Newtonian fluid.

BANG!

The two torrents of water crashed against each other instantly. The moonlight water intertwined with the underworld river and clashed fiercely. Despite both forces being heavily Yin in nature, the moon represented the gentle side while Death represented the cruelty.

The two forces were diametrically opposed from the beginning.

BOOOOOM!

The seething water crashed into the surroundings and melted the earth and surrounding pure water like acid. If it wasn't for the multi-layer barrier protecting Damien, even his body would've been incinerated.

'5 minutes...'

Park Jinho gritted his teeth.

So far, holding off the Saint Emperor was proving to be an easier task than it should've been, especially because the latter wasn't fighting back with his full strength.

However, Park Jinho didn't have infinite mana, and using attacks that could affect someone of the Saint Emperor's level required an immense amount of Law comprehension to fuel them. It was impossible for him to last a long period of time against such an opponent.

Nevertheless, he wasn't aware of Damien's progress yet, and until he got a signal from the young genius, Park Jinho could do nothing but fight.

'Almost there...' Damien thought solemnly as he felt yet another wave of terrifying fluctuations behind his back.

He felt like his skin was being seared just from being near those fluctuations, but because of the barrier protecting him, he understood that it was merely a placebo effect.

'But to make me feel a placebo only testifies to their power.'

Around 40% of the World Core had been converted by now, and the battle was getting easier with every passing second.

Damien was even able to split off a portion of his consciousness to comprehend the mysteries of heaven and earth present within the World Core.

And more than that...

'So this is the origin of Nox Mana. I haven't yet had the chance to observe pure Nox Mana carefully. Finally, I can uncover a bit about these assholes and form countermeasures against them.'

Just as Damien went to connect with the Nox Mana and observe it, a sudden change took place.

BANG!

The Nox side of the World Core suddenly lashed out furiously, starting an unexpected offensive against its counterpart.

"Keuk...!"

Damien swallowed down the blood crawling up his throat and focused on controlling the pure World Core's essence.

Using Void Mana as a medium, he was able to somewhat manipulate this untouchable mana and become one with it.

But a battle between energies like this was both more complex and far simpler than a battle between sentient beings.

There was no need for fancy techniques or scheming, every collision would be head-on and without planning.

However, each collision was a competition of laws. Whichever side came out on top would rule.

Damien was able to hold out because he had firm comprehension of four of the foundational elements of a world. Using these along with the World Core's own stray comprehension, he was able to last until only 5 minutes remained before he took main control over the World Core.

However...

"Did you think I would allow you to get away so easily, boy?"

A disconnected voice boomed through the cavern, its source being a large eye that opened on the Corrupted half of the World Core.

Damien frowned.

"This bastard...you really can't let me do anything in peace."

"Hahahaha! And why should I do that? Your expressions are far more amusing if I act this way."

"You sound like a creepy stalker."

"It's not right to denounce an Emperor, you know."

The Saint Emperor conversed with Damien like an uncle trying to gain his nephew's affection, but throughout their conversation, their clashes became fiercer and more deadly.

The Laws hidden within Nox Mana were especially clear at the moment.

Death, annihilation, extermination, a hint of the 5 elements, and even...

'It can't be.'

Damien shook off the absurd assumption forming in his head and counterattacked with his own laws.

Life, Death, Reincarnation, Space, Time, Fire, Lightning, and even a hint of Void merges into the pure World Core mana and shot forward.

These Laws clashed with their enemies.

It was a silent clash. There wasn't anything particularly entertaining about the scene.

But at the same time, it was mystical.

Two waves of different laws intertwined and mingled. While the laws clashed, they also followed their natural instinct to exist in harmony.

It was a strange dichotomy to witness, especially in such a vague form, but Damien could feel comprehension pouring into his mind.

The relationships between elements that he'd been trying to understand, wasn't this a glimpse of it?

Damien almost wanted to jump up and hug the Saint Emperor.

After all, for the last few minutes of their first interaction...

The Saint Emperor had given Damien a bigger gift than he'd ever expected to give.

Chapter 789 Final Stand [5]

The way Life and Death interacted was relatively simple. The two Laws represented polar opposites, and while they shared a symbiotic relationship, it was also common for them to clash at a moment's notice.

Reincarnation represented the delicate balance in which these two opposites harmonized.

Space and Time were more convoluted in many different ways. For one, there wasn't a defined boundary between them, and they were always interacting as if they desired to be one. Along with this,

space and time didn't have a middle ground, rather their convergence point was far less of a point and more of a macrocosm in itself.

After all, the convergence of space and time created the "container" in which reality existed.

Now, with these facts in mind, how did space react when it mingled with Life, and what about Death? The same could be said about time. How did these unrelated forces interact?

While they were unrelated on the surface, in reality, they had far more relation than anyone could imagine.

What was space if not a place for life to reside? Where could life exist without space for it to exist within?

And without time, what was the measure of death? The concept of lifespan would disappear, the concept of maturity would disappear, and all the functions of life that allowed death to thrive would cease existing.

In essence, these four forces shared a complex relationship that was represented within the universal law, and it wasn't just them.

The five elements, creation and destruction, and all other concepts in existence were connected somehow.

'That connection is being represented here.'

Due to the clash between two different World Core variants, the laws of the universe were wantonly being thrown about the World Core Space.

While it didn't mean anything to the Saint Emperor, who'd already reached a level where he could touch the universal law with the tips of his fingers, it was everything to Damien.

'This is it. This is everything. If I can internalize this...'

Damien sunk into comprehension without care for his surroundings. Even if he didn't put his trust in Park Jinho, the commander was his only hope of survival on the physical plane, and with the World Cores clashing so ferociously, he didn't have to mediate the battle much either.

As long as he diverted a portion of his consciousness to maintain the world's stability...

'Let's see what I can gain from this unexpected opportunity.'

It had to be remembered that a Demigod stood opposed to Damien. Immersing himself in comprehension at this juncture contained just as much risk as it did reward...

...or at least, that's what Damien thought.

'He's a fast learner. At this rate, I shouldn't have to wait too long before he reaches "that" level.'

The Saint Emperor watched Damien as he controlled the Infected World Core to retaliate with the bare minimum of required strength to survive.

His consciousness was split in two, with both sides partaking in battle, but neither looked distressed in the slightest.

'Park Jinho is just average. With time, he too will fade into the annals of history. This boy, however...the change he brings to this universe will be immense, likely more immense than even our advent.'

The Saint Emperor felt something bubbling up in his chest, a feeling he hadn't experienced so prominently in many years.

'Excitement.'

A burning anticipation filled his chest as he thought of Damien's, no, the Seed's future achievements.

However, nothing was set in stone. Fate was a mysterious force, firm at times yet extremely malleable at others.

When it came to the fate of someone like Damien, there were countless different branching paths that he could possibly take depending on the situation.

'I want to drive him to despair.'

If so, Damien's path would be that of an Asura. Watching him destroy the universe with his own hands would be a treat, especially if the Saint Emperor could appear during the aftermath and consume the Seed's power.

However...

'That isn't nearly the most amusing timeline.'

As someone who'd lived for countless hundreds of thousands of years, the Saint Emperor was a being consumed by boredom.

He participated in the war personally for a spark of entertainment, and also to see if he could find someone with the potential to become entertainment in the future.

Instead, he found Damien, someone who far surpassed any expectations he could've possibly held.

'There are so many paths, it is almost euphoric to imagine them playing out. However, only one can come into existence.'

The Saint Emperor smiled.

'Let us see how his life plays out first. It seems he is already on quite the interesting path.'

The Saint Emperor glanced over at Damien, who was surrounded by willowisps of pitch-black mana that constantly shifted between multiple different concepts. His smile only grew wider and more perverse when he saw it.

His fists clenched, and a trace of murky black mana appeared around it.

But unlike last time, it wasn't met by heavenly retribution.

The black mana was allowed to swirl freely.

After all, with the source nearby, how could the heavens dare to interfere?

'Is it another three minutes before the process is over? Shall I entertain this Park Jinho for a bit before I go?'

The Saint Emperor casually parried Park Jinho's swords with his bare forearms and counterattacked with the ferocity of a tiger.

Right hook, a jab from the left, another straight punch, an uppercut to the jaw; the uppercut lost momentum halfway through as the Saint Emperor impossibly changed its trajectory and slammed the back of his fist into Park Jinho's nose.

Bang!

The human commander's body went flying. Before he could regain his senses, the Saint Emperor was before him again.

He felt like every attack was being forcefully etched into his soul. He could clearly remember every pattern, every slight nuance of the Saint Emperor's movements as the man utterly decimated him.

'I must make distance...!'

Park Jinho truly tried his best. He used every tactic in his arsenal. He utilized Water Laws to their utmost, giving way to a mystical showing of water's properties, however, it was no use.

'He was toying with me from the beginning.'

The realization struck along with another thunderous fist,

It was inconceivable.

Even when he barely used mana, the Saint Emperor's precise movements honed over hundreds of thousands of years of training were more than enough to suppress someone of Park Jinho's level.

Not to mention, the pure comprehensive ability of a Demigod.

As a being who nearly surpassed the universe, the Saint Emperor had an inexplicable ability to deconstruct its laws.

Though it wasn't absolute, it was an ability that could absolutely suppress those with less understanding of those base concepts than him.

In essence, it was an ability that boiled down to the universal law once again.

Park Jinho gritted his teeth and fought back with everything he had. He swirled through the air like a dreidel, displaying all 63 Faces of Water one after another.

The first phase began gently, but the last phase was a raging tsunami that could consume a planet with its fury.

The ability itself was flawless, but the enemy was too powerful for it to show its worth.

It was a depressing fight.

Park Jinho felt the desire to give up countless times.

But somehow, he managed to persevere past his pessimism.

5 minutes passed.

The world began rumbling once more.

Chapter 790 Final Stand [6]

Damien's eyes shot open.

His irises reflected brilliant blue and abyssal black, but with every second, the iridescent blue light swallowed the blackness and refused to let it live.

5 minutes had passed, and with the Saint Emperor's unexpected aid, 50% of the World Core had been purified.

There was nothing left for Damien to do.

The reflections faded from his irises, and his consciousness returned to reality.

'I still need to facilitate the process to watch out for changes, but it should be largely autonomous at this point. The Saint Emperor also can't regain control without spending a considerable amount of time tipping the balance again. After all...'

This newly formed World Core wasn't the same as the one that'd been corrupted the first time. This World Core was influenced by Damien, and transitively, the Void.

"Is it finished?"

The words didn't come from Park Jinho, but from the Saint Emperor. The Nox Demigod smilingly looked at Damien with a look of interest coloring his eyes.

Park Jinho looked over curiously as well.

Damien glanced at Park Jinho and nodded.

"It's finished. His power should be significantly weakening with every passing second."

"Aha, that one is true, but it isn't pleasant if you look down on me too much."

The Saint Emperor's demeanor was ever-changing. In a split second, his jovial attitude turned cold.

"It is true that my defeat was decided long ago, and it is also true that my best course of action from this point forward is retreat, however..."

The Saint Emperor raised his arms above his head and began to gather mana.

"Let me leave you a reminder. This retreat was not caused by you, it was not provoked by the measly forces you dare to call Heaven's Army. This retreat was forced by a single man and his ability to alter the very fabric of reality."

The sky turned black.

The sun disappeared from Calypto, and the entire realm was submerged in blackness.

It began to rain.

"I do not particularly enjoy being looked down on. I shall leave you a treat before I leave, a reminder of why I am titled an Emperor."

"You think you can leave as you please?" Park Jinho sneered.

"Do you truly believe you can stop me?"

The Saint Emperor snapped his finger.

The world cracked.

It wasn't a mere expression, it wasn't an action that took a great deal of power to execute.

A mere snap of the finger created a crack that split Calypto into two even halves.

Crack!

Crack! Crack! Crack!

RUMBLE!

Spiderwebs spread from the crack and the structural stability of the world was immediately challenged.

"Fuck!"

Damien cursed as he inserted his consciousness back into the World Core. He pushed Void Mana into the pure blue World Mana and controlled it, using it as a tether to hold the world together.

"Hahaha! You were planning to use this planet well, were you not? An Emperor's possessions...are his alone!"

KA-BOOM!

A crackle of lightning resounded through the world. The torrent of rain pouring from the blackened sky became furious, and even Damien began to feel its effects.

'He is...corrupting the world again.'

Damien's eyes hardened.

This wasn't a corruption that would ever reach the World Core now that the core itself regained its ability to fight.

There was no real benefit to corrupting Claypto a second time.

The Saint Emperor was merely toying with his enemies.

He turned Calypto into a land uninhabitable by any race other than the Nox, he turned it into an infertile land that couldn't birthe or house a single ounce of life.

And there wasn't a single person powerful enough to stop him.

Park Jinho and Damien could only powerlessly watch as the oceans around them turned black and the world was ruined.

'At this rate...'

Damien frowned. At this rate, the entire world would be destroyed, along with everyone on it.

'How would I even stop him...?!'

Frustration set in.

Frustration caused by weakness.

This was absolute power.

Even while limited to the form of a 4th class being, the Saint Emperor could easily waste a planet.

This was the same feeling Damien felt long ago, facing an opponent whose status wasn't much weaker than the Saint Emperor.

Watching a battle where an entire horde of Demigods had to work together to fight a single being instilled the same sense of powerlessness deep into his bones.

The true pinnacle of the universe was still far away.

It wasn't something he could touch yet.

But...

'It's closer than I imagined.'

It burned. The desire to become stronger was almost suffocating.

But this type of suffocation, Damien didn't mind at all.

He watched the Saint Emperor with cold and indifferent eyes.

He engrained every detail of the latter's existence into his mind, from his appearance down to the intricate nuances of his mana.

"Next time we meet, I will destroy you," Damien muttered.

The Saint Emperor looked over with an anticipatory smile on his face. "I truly hope you can live up to those words."

His body floated into the air. The life-or-death arena faded from existence, and the Saint Emperor began moving to exit Calypto's atmosphere.

As always, he was uninhibited.

Damien and Park Jinho watched desolately as he left.

"Should we do something?"

"Even if we want to, can we?"

Damien looked over at the downtrodden Park Jinho.

The spark his eyes once possessed was gone.

"Facing a Demigod in single combat is an eye-opening experience, huh."

"Eye-opening...is definitely one way to put it."

"..."

The duo sat silently.

There was nothing to say.

They saved Calypto...didn't they?

Despite its state, the world was still alive...wasn't it?

But they only felt desolation and disappointment.

The Saint Emperor was like a storm. He appeared, acted without restraint and plunged everything into chaos, then left as if nothing happened.

Damien and Park Jinho had weathered that storm, sure, but as people who'd faced it directly, they understood more than anything the truth behind the situation.

"We were spared."

"He treated us like unruly children."

"What a disgusting feeling."

Battle was an imperative concept in this world. Battle was what drove society to improve, and it was what allowed every individual a chance to ascend to Godhood.

Battle was something that almost every practitioner loved, even if it was to different extents.

But...

That was only when the battle had purpose.

The Saint Emperor's battle against Damien and Park Jinho...?

It was utterly pointless.

It was a show of power and a move to crush the spirits of the enemy.

It was the mere whim of a higher existence.

Damien begrudgingly picked himself up off the floor.

The severed ocean around him was dyed black due to recent events, and acted as an opaque barrier hiding him from the rest of the world.

Haa...

A sigh leaked from his lips.

Mulling over a pointless battle was more pointless than the battle itself.

Trying to rationalize the utterly random whim of a higher existence was more pointless than even that.

Instead, he had to move forward.

Just like he'd always done, he had to move forward while pushing the past behind him.

Next time, his battle with the Saint Emperor wouldn't be pointless, no, it would be the moment the Nox realized just how terrifying of an enemy Damien could be.

Until then...

Damien turned to Park Jinho with a tired smile on his face.

"Since things have come to this, should we do some damage control and salvage what we can?"

Park Jinho looked back at him with the same smile on his face. It seemed he had also realized the same things as Damien.

"Mm," Park Jinho gave a sound of affirmation.

His eyes turned up at the blackened sky.

"After all, the war never ends."