

Void 281

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There was no massive explosion, no remarkable sign that his slash had even caused damage. There was only the darkness left behind once all light was consumed by that thin black line.

The world was silent. When light once again flooded the area, Damien was finally able to see the effects of his new art.

The ground had been cleaved in two even though the slash didn't extend that far. Although the girth of the new chasm wasn't anything major, the depth and length were indeterminable.

Other than that single far-reaching line, nothing else remained in front of him.

“Haa...”

The distant sounds of battle finally returned as everything went back to normal. It was only then that Damien realized how far he and Polius had moved from the original battlefield.

Each of their blows carried the power to wipe out tens of Captains at once, so it was only natural that they wouldn't be confined to a small area while making their exchange.

As Damien caught his breath, his mind became focused on the sword slash he had just released. To him, it was more than just a mere skill. He had obtained a surprising amount of insight while he performed it.

Dimensional Severance. It was something he had been cooking up for a long time, but he never found the proper catalyst to turn it into reality.

A sword that could cut through even the dimension itself. This was a move that would be possible to use purely with his dimensional magic, but he hadn't reached a high enough level of understanding to do so.

As such, he needed something to fill in the gaps. Now that he had unlocked his low-level Void Essence, he had finally found that something.

As for the black lightning, golden sunflames, and other additions he made before he cast, they weren't necessary unless he wanted to increase the power output. As for why he did it, it was more instinctual than anything.

In that moment when he finally grasped Dimensional Severance for the first time, he simply allowed his mind and body to harmonize without trying to force his will into the process too much. And the results spoke for themselves. Damien had been able to eliminate the Commander without much problem.

Boom!

A sudden explosive sound filled Damien's ears, which promptly began ringing as if he had just survived a nuke. His thoughts immediately scattered, his vision becoming blurry due to the abrupt impact.

Damien's body had flown away before he even realized what happened, but after being in life or death situations so many times, he was relatively quick to regain his bearings.

When he focused his attention on where he was previously standing, he saw the body of a man wreathed in an inky black substance.

“Hahaha, that attack of yours sure was something! Whew, I really would have died if I was hit by it.”

The man talked in a casual tone, but his words were laced with an unseen rage.

Damien’s eyes widened in shock. Who else could the man be besides Polius?

“Impossible...”

Damien couldn’t help but mutter the word. It was truly impossible. With the restriction and pressure of Spatial Collapse blocking his retreat, it should’ve been impossible for him to dodge the incoming Dimensional Severance.

Damien was well aware of the power of the attack he had released. Even if it was him in Polius’s place, as long as he didn’t have the spatial element, he was guaranteed death.

“I can see that you’re curious about why I’m still standing in front of you. Since you’ve proved yourself as someone worthy for me to use the power bestowed upon me, so allow me to explain. Well, the best way to learn is by doing, isn’t it? So let me just show you instead.”

Polius's figure disappeared, arriving in front of Damien before he could react. A massive hammer made entirely of inky black substance crashed down towards Damien's head.

Bang!

Damien raised his arms in an attempt to block, pouring his mana into them to heighten his defense. But for some reason, it didn't seem to have much effect.

Crack!

The sound of his bones breaking seemed especially loud in that moment. But Polius didn't seem to hear it. His foot whipped forth like a scorpion's tail and hit Damien square in the chest.

Damien shot back like a bullet once again, but the only black hammer followed his path. The hammer in the air morphed its shape and became a towering sword that stabbed towards Damien's chest once more.

Damien's body flashed backwards to dodge the slash, but in that moment, Polius grabbed the hilt of the sword and unleashed a wave of black sword intent that followed Damien's movements. In the next instant, hundreds of similar waves joined it in its pursuit.

Damien's face hardened at the sight. His body became wreathed in lightning as spatial essence coated him. Due to the restrictions of the Trial World, he could only teleport a single meter away from his position, but the sword waves were blotting out the sky, making one meter an even tinier distance than it already was.

With no other option, Damien was forced to block instead of dodge. He was so sure of his last attack that he put everything into it, and now he didn't even have a weapon to fight back with.

His body twisted at unnatural angles, narrowly dodging each sword wave as they congregated on his position. But no matter how dexterous he was, he'd only be able to properly dodge if there was an opening to capitalize on.

“Keuk!”

In the end, tens of sword waves still managed to impact his body, riddling him with cuts and gashes. If it wasn't for the fact that he was able to divert the majority of the force using vector control, he'd have been cleanly sliced in half.

By the time the sword waves ended, Polius had already arrived in front of Damien once again. The inky black substance on his body split into three, creating two clones of Polius to his left and right.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Three consecutive impacts rang out as the three Poliuses punched Damien at the same time. What followed was a bloody beat down with no mercy.

Damien was thrown around like a rag doll and continuously chased by the main body or the clones. Each time they attacked him, their fists made sure to land on a spot where he had already been gouged by the sword waves.

Damien had expended a great deal of mana and mental strength to execute the Dimensional Severance earlier, so he didn't have much of a choice besides enduring the beating

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His regeneration had already kicked in a while back, but with the rate at which he was being injured, it simply couldn't keep up.

Polius flashed in front of Damien once again. The inky substance coating his body reached forward and attached to him, forcefully tugging him to the ground.

Bang!

Cracks spread through the earth from the force of impact. Damien felt something in his chest shatter, causing copious amounts of blood to flow from his mouth.

Without giving him time to rest, the inky black substance crawled up his body like a slime that was attempting to consume him. Damien instinctually let out a wisp of Void Essence when he felt the devouring force, causing the substance to reel back in fear.

Although his vision had become slightly cloudy from all the impact force he had to endure, Damien's mind was still working clearly. From this distance, he could observe Polius more clearly.

It was then that he realized where the sense of incongruity he had been feeling came from. Rather than Polius controlling the black substance, it seemed like it was the other way around instead.

The substance was simply using Polius as a medium to execute its will. It reminded Damien of a certain symbiote with the way it acted.

‘Ah, Those dark imps did something similar, didn’t they?’

It had been so long that the memory didn’t surface until now. Perhaps it was because he didn’t truly regard the dark imps seriously at that time that he had forgotten.

The followers of the Nox had a trump card. For those dark imps, they exchanged life force in exchange for power.

But this Polius clearly had more status than those cannon fodder that were sent to earth. His life force didn’t seem to be depleting as he used this power at all.

“Aha, it seems you realized something. Are you curious about how I’m able to access strength above my level like this? The answer is obvious. This is the benefit you gain from being an apostle of our Lord.”

“Keuk...that bastard Lord of yours really seems to love the color black. What, is this what happens when an edgelord evolves into a demigod?” Damien’s broken body shuddered as if he was disgusted by the thought.

“You still have the nerve to be arrogant at this time? Even with this kind of beating, you still haven’t clearly understood the situation you’re in, have you?”

Polius gazed at Damien, who was still plastered to the ground, in disdain.

“Say, I’ll give you a final out. How about you join us? It seems my Lord has taken interest in the power you used at that final moment. You’ve already seen it, the boundless power that can even dwarf the power you used at that time. If you gain this power, can you imagine how powerful you’d be? If you aren’t an idiot, take the opportunity you’re being given.”

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Damien immediately scoffed.

“Isn’t it a bit too shameless to ask me that after you beat me to a pulp? Have some conscience, would you?”

“Hahaha! Conscience, huh. What use is that in the face of power?”

“Yeah, yeah. The same old villain speech I’ve heard a hundred times over. No need to finish your words, I don’t want to hear it.”

With the lull in their fight, Damien’s regeneration was finally able to show its worth. The injuries in his body were closing at a rapid rate, but since he was covered in blood, Polius didn’t seem to notice.

Damien stood up, making sure that he emphasized his difficulty in doing it so he could keep Polius’s guard lowered. But even with this, his fighting intent was still raging.

“You still want to continue in your condition? Are you a masochist or something?” Polius truly couldn’t understand Damien.

What was the point in standing up again? What was the point of this fight at all? Honestly, Polius never once regarded it as a critical fight even when he felt the threat of death.

After all, with his Lord's protection, he didn't see any chance of losing.

"Say, why are you so committed to your Lord? You should be smart enough to know that you're nothing but a slave right? What's the point in living like that? Besides, weren't you born in this realm? It's not like you even need power to live here anyway."

Damien was truly curious about it. To him, it all seemed illogical. Luckily for him, Polius seemed to be in a talkative mood.

"Is there a need for any reason? The Lord is the one who raised me from birth. The Lord is the one who provided me with the life and the status I have now. The Lord is the one who will free us from this realm one day! At that time, who will be able to stand in front of us?! We will rule over everything!"

Damien quietly listened to his rant. In his opinion, no matter how strong this Demon Commander was, he was too naive.

The Demon Commanders grew up within the Primordial Undying Realm. And with the atmosphere of this realm, it was honestly impossible to cultivate to the level they had reached.

It was obviously by design. Why were humans unable to cultivate? Why were the beasts within the realm so weak? Even the trial, which required the geniuses to constantly kill, was relatively easy if one just slaughtered all the weak beasts around for an entire year.

The strongest non-demonic beings in this realm were at the peak of second class. If one wanted to truly excel in the trial, or if they wanted to gain actual benefits within the Trial World besides the right to gain entry to the next trial, they would be forced to face the demons.

Everything was clicking into place in Damien's head as he continued to think about it.

The Demon God, the Lord Polius was trying to convince him to serve, was obviously a Nox. And judging from all the presented facts, he was a Nox so powerful that Damien couldn't even fathom it.

If the Primordial Undying Realm wasn't actually built as a secret realm, but to contain that Nox, wouldn't everything else make sense?

The environment stunted growth, so the Nox's lackeys wouldn't be able to grow. Their only option was to feed on the Nox's power for strength, and that would in turn keep the Nox in check without allowing him too much freedom to interfere with the proceedings in the realm.

The Demons would also be weaker than those at the same level since their power and even their comprehension were borrowed from the Nox. With the restriction that limited people to 3rd class, it would be entirely possible for the Demons to be defeated.

So, when geniuses entered the realm, the Primordial Undying Tree would be able to borrow their strength to strike a critical blow to the Demons, which would then cause the Nox to lose a portion of its power.

The only thing that didn't fit Damien's calculations was the Demons' overall strength. Although Damien was able to fight somewhat evenly against Polius, he didn't think others would be the same.

He was even worried for Feng Qing'er and Qing Tan, as he had no assurance that they'd survive if they were assaulted in the same way he just was.

The chances of heaven-defying geniuses like the three of them appearing in the realm didn't seem that high, especially when the realm only opened every 10,000 years. He could only chalk it up to the Primordial Undying Tree making a mistake.

Still, realizing that the Demons used outside power to reach their current heights took a weight off Damien's shoulders. If it was like that, then even if it took some work, he was confident he had a chance at winning this fight.

Small black wisps continued to radiate from Damien's body as he thought through everything. Due to the fact that the inky black substance around Polius still had some lingering fear of the essence, he was able to stand uninterrupted during the process.

But of course, the Void Essence wasn't just there for show. It had only been around a minute since Polius's rant, but Damien could already feel that he had replenished around half his mana capacity.

If that's all he had, it was still fine. It just meant that he had to end this fight fast. Looking back up at Polius, he slowly wiped the blood off his eyelids.

"Now then," he grinned. "Should we start round 2?"

Damien and Polius had already moved many kilometers away from the main battlefield, but those fighting on it had hardly noticed.

Those fifty geniuses were constantly letting out waves upon waves of massive elemental attacks that impacted the Demon army, while the Demon Captains counterattacked with their own skills.

As for the Demon Generals, a few squads had been put together to keep them occupied until the three aces of their group became free to help them.

As Damien had expected, the most these geniuses could do was hold back the Demon Generals. But for some reason, they didn't seem to be facing as much strain as they should have expected.

There was definitely something odd happening on the battlefield, but unfortunately, there wasn't a single person who had the time to even realize it.

Skree!

A piercing cry rang through the air a few kilometers away from the main battlefield. A shimmering reddish orange Phoenix flapped its wings domineeringly as it continuously shot out waves of feathers and Phoenix phantoms towards its opponent.

But the inky black substance covering her opponent seemed to ward her flames away with ease.

In fact, the Phoenix herself was already riddled with wounds. She wasn't even able to maintain her human transformation anymore, using her true form to fight instead.

That's right. This Phoenix was none other than Feng Qing'er. As Damien had expected, she was having a far more difficult time with her opponent than she originally expected.

Skree!

Another fierce cry rang out as the clouds in the sky were dyed red. Hundreds of flaming balls and swords fell from the clouds like comets, heading straight for Kroa.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The inky substance moved with its own will, extending and contracting to dodge and parry any flames that got close to it.

But she already knew this would happen. Feng Qing'er flapped her wings powerfully and shot forward, body slamming into Kroa.

Boom!

The impact force sent her flying backwards. Feng Qing'er chased after her with zeal, countless flaming feathers heading her charge and blotting out the sky above.

Kroa was no longer able to distinguish between the flaming feathers and the Phoenix hiding within them.

Crack!

The ground cracked as dozens of flaming pillars shot up and encased Kroa's body within. These pillars didn't seem to have any goal besides restricting her movements.

Bang!

Feng Qing'er's body shot through the flame curtain and impacted Kroa once again, but this time, she was prepared.

The black substance latched onto Feng Qing'er's body and swung her around. Using her as a shield, it charged through the flames and escaped the imprisonment of the flame columns.

Boom!

Feng Qing'er's body was slammed into the ground. The flames burning around her had dimmed considerably.

"How's that, you damn bird bitch! Who's the ugly one now?!"

Kroa laughed madly as the black substance began spreading over Feng Qing'er's injured body. Just like it tried to do with Damien, it was attempting to devour her alive.

But unlike Damien, Feng Qing'er didn't have Void Essence to ward it off.

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The inky black substance crawled up Feng Qing'er's body, adhering to her skin and refusing to be defeated no matter how hard Feng Qing'er pushed her flames.

That inky black substance was, after all, something that was given to the Commanders, or rather, the Apostles, by the Nox itself. There was no way something mediocre would be able to compete with it.

The Void Essence, even when it was as low level as Damien's, was something inviolable especially when it came to devouring. It was impossible for the inky substance to compete with it.

But Feng Qing'er's flames didn't carry the same danger. Perhaps if she had reached her mother's level and blossomed into a true Fire Phoenix, it'd be a different case, but she was still in what could be considered her Adolescence Phase.

Feng Qing'er still fiercely resisted even while knowing this. She could feel that the inky black substance wanted to consume her, but she had no plans of allowing it to do so. She had even tuned out Kroa's obnoxious voice as all her effort was focused on the task in front of her.

Rains of flame descended from the sky and impacted her position, forcing Kroa to jump away and hastily dodge. Since the inky substance had already started to consume Feng Qing'er, it wasn't paying any attention to Kroa's situation anymore.

It only needed her alive so it could manifest. It didn't care what her condition was. And as Damien had learned only a few moments prior, the Apostles weren't actually that hard to deal with as long as they didn't have the protection of the Nox.

“Ahhh!”

A harrowing shriek rang out as Kroa was hit with Feng Qing'er's flames for the first time. Even that single impact had melted her flesh and caused blisters to rapidly form on her body. She didn't even realize how much she had been underestimating her opponent until that point:

The reason Feng Qing'er couldn't win was due to the inky black substance alone. Unlike Polius, Kroa didn't actually have the technique necessary to properly utilize the strength she was granted. She was extremely useless without the substance.

Hearing her shriek revitalized Feng Qing'er a bit. She smirked even while on the verge of death, pouring more and more mana into the neverending rain of hellfire that fell upon Kroa's position.

But she still needed to divert a majority of her focus towards the substance that was on her body.

Feng Qing'er rapidly revolved her mana, strengthening her feathers and making them razor sharp. She hoped that with the addition of superheated flames onto the innate sharpness of her feathers, she'd have a chance to break through.

But the substance coating her body wasn't simple at all. Even when she managed to make a tear in its surface, the surrounding substance would expand and immediately fill up the gap. The slime-like ability that made it nigh-invincible was probably the most troublesome part of the entire ordeal.

Feng Qing'er was utterly out of ideas already. As the substance expanded and took up more space on her body, her mana was given less and less freedom to move. Now that her whole upper body was almost encased in it, she could no longer affect the ambient air.

The flaming rain died down due to this, and even though Kroa had been severely burned to the point where her face was hardly recognizable, she was still alive. Her life force was still more than enough to support the substance until it had fully consumed Feng Qing'er.

Feng Qing'er could only imbue mana into her own body to counterattack the substance, but she had already seen from her previous tries that this method wouldn't bear any fruit.

The substance rapidly expanded, reaching all the way to her tail and wrapping around itself, encasing Feng Qing'er inside of a black cocoon that she was unable to escape from. Her mana had less and less control as time went on, to the point where even the previous minor amount of imbuelement she could do became limited.

“Kh!”

Immediately after the cocoon was completed, the speed of devouring increased by a large margin. Feng Qing'er's wings were the first to deteriorate, becoming specks of every that fed into the cocoon and strengthened it.

The light in her eyes had dimmed considerably as she began to lose hope. But even then, she was of the will to go down fighting. There was no way she'd allow this thing to have an easy time consuming her.

But as if fate was toying with her, the second she forged the resolve to die with flare, her mind blanked.

When Feng Qing'er opened her eyes, she was no longer trapped within the black cocoon. She was actually standing in the middle of an entirely different battlefield surrounded by many people and races she'd never seen before.

A plethora of skills blasted forth chaotically. There was barely even a method to differentiate between enemy and ally. From the skies to the ground and even the seas to the side, battles were raging between multiple forces.

Suddenly, a fierce wave of flames descended from the sky and immediately incinerated thousands that were fighting on the ground. When Feng Qing'er directed her gaze at the source, she was astonished to see a massive Phoenix unlike any she had ever seen before.

It was a Phoenix so regal and domineering that even her mother couldn't match up to it. She thought that the demeanor of the Phoenix she was watching fit a dragon more, but for some reason, the Phoenix didn't seem out of place at all.

The Phoenix's body twirled as it shot into the air. An array of flaming feathers shot into the surroundings like light reflected off of a spinning chandelier.

But as a Phoenix herself, Feng Qing'er easily noticed the difference between these feathers and her own.

They were imbued with something she had never seen before. It was a strange energy that influenced mana and relied on mana, but wasn't quite mana itself.

Even though she had no clue what she was watching, the term flashed into her mind as if she had known it since birth.

[Runic Flame Embodiment]

The flaming runes that took the shape of feathers crashed into the ground and soared through the sky. Unlike the small explosions Feng Qing'er could produce, each rune exploded with the force of a nuke.

Feng Qing'er felt like she was watching the end of the world when the runes exploded, but when the flames brushed past her skin, she noticed yet another difference.

These flames weren't simply destructive. They were imbued with the properties of reincarnation that a Fire Phoenix embodied, as well as the effects of the unique elemental path that this specific Phoenix followed.

Feng Qing'er's bloodline began to rage and tumble. It rapidly moved as if a charging bull, tearing apart everything in its way.

Fire Phoenixes and Fire Dragons were often compared due to the long-standing rivalry between the two species and the similarities between their constitutions.

Dragons were well known for their tyranny and domineering behavior, while Phoenixes were said to be more gentle and elegant. Although both could bring damage, their methods and the things they embodied differed greatly.

But who was to say that a Phoenix couldn't be domineering? Who decided that they had to be gentle and accepting? Feng Qing'er, for one, was never the type to adhere to this stereotype.

She was as domineering and hot-tempered as a dragon.

Reincarnation flames were the crowning ability of Fire Phoenixes, something they wouldn't unlock until they received their first Universe Baptism and became true 4th class existences.

And the concept of reincarnation was most often regarded as closer to life than death. It was regarded as the life after death. But for reincarnation to exist, one must experience death first.

Perhaps that's the reason why most Fire Phoenixes never awakened their flames until after the Universe Baptism. Even in the most life-threatening of situations, the reincarnation flames would simply regard death as the beginning of a new life.

But Feng Qing'er's current situation was different. As she watched the insane war of proportions she could never fathom, she was surrounded by death on all sides. And in the outdid world, she was wrapped in a cocoon made of an unprecedented pure death mana.

A Phoenix could be domineering too. They had no reason to be gentle or stick to stereotypes when they were in battle. It was just that the domineering of a Phoenix was far different than that of a Dragon.

It wasn't direct and tyrannical to the point where those around them forced to acknowledge it. No. For a Phoenix, what it meant to be domineering was something else.

They were kind. They were gentle. They embodied life, death, and the cycle of reincarnation.

But the second they decided to show their true colors, the second they decided to be domineering...

The foundation of the universe would shake from their wrath.

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In the outside world, Feng Qing'er's body had begun burning up intensely. The heat of the flames was incomparable to what she was outputting before, and she wasn't even doing it consciously.

Feng Qing'er's body had decayed to the point where she no longer had extremities. Her tail and wings had become nothing, and even her torso had begun to decay as well. But the second those flames burst from her body, the inky substance was forced to retreat.

It was incinerated the second it even touched the flames.

The flames were wild and uncontrolled. They didn't even seem to listen to Feng Qing'er. Rather, she seemed to be their target.

The flames enveloped her even faster than the cocoon did, and immediately went to work. The corrupted areas on Feng Qing'er's body were burned first, a sacred white light shone from the flames and purified the corruption before burning away the areas entirely.

From her torso to her heart and her head, all of it was burned until not even ashes of Feng Qing'er's body existed anymore.

Sensing the situation, the black substance unwillingly retreated back onto the burnt body of the Apostle Kroa. After all. If there was no body for it to consume and corrupt, there was no point in continuing what it was doing.

When the substance gathered around Kroa's body and began retreating from where Feng Qing'er once was, a wisp of sacred orange flames flashed into being.

It was minuscule at first, being no more than the size of a coin. But it rapidly expanded. As it grew in size, it seemed to take shape as well, it was no longer untamable and wild as it was when the cocoon was encasing it.

A massive pair of flame wings were formed, and a majestic tail and the head of a bird followed after. A Phoenix made entirely of flames that was tens of meters long soon encompassed the empty space.

But as if that wasn't enough, new changes sprouted forth after the initial construct was formed. Bones, blood vessels and nerves, muscles, organs, skin, and feathers.

The makeup of a true Phoenix started to form. Life was being born from fire.

Thump!

A flaming heart solidified its position in the newly created Phoenix's body. It thumped with so much vigor that the sound attracted the attention of the receding Apostle.

Kroa was feeling both fulfilled and unfulfilled at the same time as she was forced to leave the area. While she was extremely happy that Feng Qing'er had died, she was also aghast when she realized her own condition.

Her face was scarred and ugly. She had tried to heal it already, but the scars refused to leave. From now on, her already below-average features were even more tainted.

She was horrified, but by the time she registered the situation, Feng Qing'er had already been consumed by her dark material.

Thump!

It was then that she heard a noise that sounded like the beating of a heart.

Thump!

The noise sounded again, causing her to turn and face the direction she had just left from. And unexpectedly, she was able to witness the final layer of feathers covering Feng Qing'er exposed skin.

In the place where nothing but empty land stood a second ago, there was a majestic Phoenix with its eyes closed peacefully. Its reddish-orange feathers were pristine and beautiful, giving off a regal aura as if the Phoenix was the Queen of everything.

The wingspan of the Phoenix was truly massive, and it seemed to want to blot out the sun. Compared to Feng Qing'er's true body, this Phoenix was obviously a level higher.

Thump! Thump!

The beating sounds became louder and louder. It seemed like every beat of the heart caused the ground to quake and the sky to tremble.

And then, it stopped. Everything turned silent. Even Kroa held her breath as she fixedly stared at the beautiful Phoenix in front of her.

Its eyes slowly opened. Although they were hazy at first, they quickly regained focus. The first thing those eyes saw was Kroa staring back at them.

BOOM!

A raging torrent of flames burst from the Phoenix's body. The shockwave that followed caused Kroa to be pushed back hundreds of meters even with the support of her dark material.

When Kroa raised her head, her mind blanked. The sky was carpeted in runic scripture that she couldn't understand. Those flaming runes danced through the air like little sprites, gleeful that they were finally acknowledged.

It was then that the Phoenix finally spoke. With its full attention on Kroa, its mouth curved into a gloating smile.

"It's only been a few minutes since I was trapped in that shitty cocoon, and you actually managed to get even uglier! Congratulations! Your appearance has officially reached the level where it makes me want to vomit just looking at you!"

Kroa's blank expression was immediately twisted in rage. That bitch! How the hell was she still alive?!

“YOU BITCH! I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!”

Bang!

The dark material twisted through the air and flashed in forth of Feng Qing’er’s new Phoenix form, capitalizing on Kroa’s rage to fuel itself even further.

It wrapped around Kroa’s fist and maximized the power output of the wild punch she threw to its peak. It was to the point where Kroa’s arm was destined to tear out of its socket due to excess force.

But due to her furious state, Kroa could care less. As long as she could kill Feng Qing’er, nothing else mattered.

Seeing the incoming attack, Feng Qing’er’s smirk only widened. ‘Seriously? I lost to this?’ She inwardly sneered in derision.

Her wings flapped lightly, pushing her back a few inches. But she had never meant to use the maneuver to dodge. Instead, it was a signal. A signal to the runes that were dancing through the air.

Tens, if not hundreds, of runes fell from the sky like shooting stars. Their forms twisted and morphed into the shape of feathers and swords before lining themselves up in a formation and charging at Kroa like a group of torpedos.

The air screeched as the concentrated power of the runes passed through it. If it wasn’t for the speed at which the runes traveled exceeding the speed the air broke, the runes would’ve easily torn through space in an instant.

Before long, Kroa was surrounded by runes that seemed to have a mind of their own. They circled around her and attacked her blind spots, and whenever she was able to catch them, they exploded in her face.

“AHHHH!”

Kroa screamed to vent her frustration. Her body kept flying from one side of the circle to the next. The runes were tossing her around like they were playing monkey in the middle and she was the ball.

But she was powerless to stop it. The dark material that was once able to easily ignore Feng Qing'er's flames now had to put a large majority of its attention on blocking the flames and making sure it wasn't injured.

As a result(Kroa was forced to personally head all the impact force that passed through the dark material and landed on her body. Her ribs shattered multiple times over and blood constantly poured out of her mouth.

“What the hell are you doing?! Protect me you useless piece of shit!”

Kroa madly clawed at the dark material as if blaming it for her inadequacy. But perhaps the stupidest move she could make was to anger the being that had been hard carrying her throughout the entire fight.

Annoyed by her insolence, the dark material slightly let up on its defense, allowing a portion of the flames' heat to pass through and hit Kroa's body.

“AHHHHHH! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Please forgive me, your excellence!”

Kroa’s tone shifted immediately. She begged the dark material for mercy with every fiber of her being. But the voice that came out was nothing more than a croak.

She was probably the most clueless about the situation out of the three that were present. If Feng Qing’er had barraged her with fire rain with the flames she currently possessed, Kroa would have died merely because she was in the vicinity of the heatwave.

Even being directly impacted by the flames was too much for her. A minor portion of the heat had caused her body to blacken and char. Her eyeballs almost melted due to the insane temperature of the heatwave.

Slowly but surely, pieces of the dark material were incinerated. Even as it hurriedly patched itself up as it did before, it was continuously incinerated. The battle soon became a matter of speed.

Feng Qing’er’s smile blossomed. “Now then, little thing. Which do you think will happen first? Will you be able to patch yourself up, or will my flames burn you to ashes? Place your bets!”

It was Feng Qing’er’s first taste of Reincarnation Flames, and frankly, she was loving every second of it.

Chapter 285 Racing [9]

The sky was filled in a black and gold hue that blotted out even the artificial sun that lit the Trial World. Underneath such a sky, a fierce battle was still raging.

Damien's fists were coated in a mixture of golden flames and black lightning, constantly barraging Polius, whose dark material was forming the shape of a plethora of weapons to counter.

A massive greatsword sprung forth from the earth, threatening to impale Damien, but it was a step too slow. He had already teleported a meter to the left and evaded it.

Damien's flame-lightning fists struck again, taking the moment between when the dark material could form a different weapon to collide with Polius's face with extreme power.

The ground below the two cracked into pieces as they shot into the distance. Polius had been thrown by the force of the punch, while Damien was chasing him like a homing missile.

Crackle!

The black-gold sky was trembling with hidden power, following the duo's movements and casting a formless pressure onto Polius's shoulders.

The two had already been fighting for a good amount of time, so the Demon Commander was well aware of the frightening power that was brewing above him.

It was because he was aware that he made sure to constantly move, never staying in one place long enough for that frightening mass to lock onto him.

Bang!

A pillar of flames rose from the ground below Polius's feet just as he managed to stabilize himself. Although the dark material had protected him, his balance was still disrupted.

As if waiting for the opportunity, a crackle of black lightning laced with shimmering golden flames struck down from the heavens, blasting Polius to the ground.

“Keuk...!”

To say he was frustrated was an understatement. Ever since Damien had begun his counterattack, he'd been at a disadvantage. Regardless of how skilled he was, it didn't matter if he wasn't given the opportunity to showcase his skill.

His dark material was granting him a powerful defense that had yet to be penetrated, but that was it. Its attacking capabilities were dwindling by the second as it was forced to bear the full brunt of Damien's assault.

It was the first time he realized the flaw in his own power. No, it wasn't his own power, and that's where the flaw came from.

He had refined his technique to its limit and become an extremely skilled fighter, but the mana he had in his body was granted to him by an external force. Due to this, he was never able to unleash the full potential of his martial arts.

But over the course of this battle, he could feel the dark material slowly giving him a bit of control over it. He wasn't like Kroa who had gone mad at the slightest of provocation, he was a calm man who could analyze the situation rationally.

So he bid his time and took the beating. The second the flame-lightning strike fell from the heavens, he knew it was his opportunity.

Polius gathered his dark material around his body and circulated his mana in a strange pattern. The dark material began to swirl, its consciousness realizing the intentions of its host.

The dark material soon began to follow the same path as the mana Polius was circulating. It split into two halves and rotated, forming something akin to a yin-yang symbol in front of Polius's chest.

When the symbol fully formed, it further split and moved to its user's arms and fists. The whole process happened in an instant, before the flame-lightning even struck the ground.

Boom!

The bolt finally struck true, ripping the earth asunder and forming a crater the size of a large lake. Damien warily watched the crater for any signs of life, when suddenly, his danger sense started ringing crazily.

"Yin-Yang Coiling Dragons."

A soft mutter rang out from behind him. Damien's body immediately twisted to avoid the trajectory of the unknown attack:

When his eyes glanced back, he saw twin dragons, one white and one black, coiling around each other and shooting towards him. Even though he had twisted his body to avoid their paths, it didn't seem like they would miss.

Rather, it seemed like no matter how Damien dodged, they'd strike true on their target. Realizing this, Damien could only choose to block.

His vector field immediately formed in the space around him, taking control over the surroundings and trying to dilute the attacks, but Damien soon realized that even this was impossible.

‘What the hell?’

An attack that wouldn't be altered by vectors didn't seem possible to him. Anything that traveled through space would be affected by it, so how was it possible for them to ignore it?

Damien's question went unanswered, though, as the twin dragons soon crashed into his body after ignoring his defense.

“ARGH!”

A pained cry was released from his mouth. Even he was surprised by the fact.

The black dragon struck his stomach, tearing through his flesh and leaving a gaping hole in his body. However, that amount of pain wasn't something Damien couldn't bear.

The white dragon had completely ignored his physical body, entering inside of him while the black dragon ravaged his body. At first, Damien didn't pay it much attention. Anything that entered his body was bound to be devoured by his Void Essence.

But surprisingly enough, the white dragon vanished when it entered his body. When Damien felt its presence again, he could only feel the immense sense of danger it brought with it.

The white dragon was somewhere within him. That much he was sure of. But the area it had intruded upon was something he had never touched before.

The white dragon exploded. That explosion was what caused Damien to undergo a pain he had never felt before.

It was like his soul was being torn to shreds. No, that might've actually been the case.

His Void Physique was, after all, a physique. It didn't handle soul protection. Rather, the concept of a soul wasn't something Damien had encountered at all in his travels so far.

While he never doubted its existence, he also didn't think it was as important as people usually made it out to be since nobody he met had attacks related to the soul.

But as he felt the unbearable pain of his soul being damaged, he realized how naive he had been. It wasn't because it didn't exist, it was just that the worlds he had been to so far were too low level to have anything of the sort.

He hadn't had many conflicts in the Cloud Plane since he arrived. If he had stumbled upon someone who could use soul attacks before, he might've suffered an even worse fate.

Luckily, his opponent was a pseudo-cultivator using borrowed power. Damien's vision was hazy and his mind was in shambles, but he could somewhat make out his surroundings still.

Polius didn't seem to be any better than he was. His face was pale and blood was constantly leaking from his seven orifices. It was clear that Polius had made a hefty sacrifice to injure Damien's soul.

'Fuck this.' Damien cursed inwardly. He was surprised that he could even think straight while enduring the pain, but that didn't matter much right now. If he could think straight, then he could attack as well.

And the moment when Polius had his guard down after a massive attack was the perfect timing.

Damien urged his feet to move. He stumbled forward like a staggering drunk, walking slowly towards Polius.

And Polius could only watch it happen. But he wasn't worried. Suffering from a soul injury was far worse than any physical injury could be. Even if Damien could recover, it wasn't something he could do any time soon.

As Damien stumbled forward, his fist began to glow. A soft light akin to moonlight gently enveloped it and grew ever brighter.

By the time Damien reached Polius, it had grown so bright that it easily hid the light of the seven orbs that encircled it.

Damien raised his arm and pulled it back as if he was drawing a bow. His opponent couldn't move, but the dark material was still incredibly strong. He had to go all out if he wanted to puncture its defense.

The vectors around his arm responded to his mana, doubling the momentum and acceleration of the fist. Space warped as well, helping the fist reach its target faster.

The fist that originally moved slow enough that even a child could track it sped up to the point where it didn't even look like it was moving anymore.

And that was when Damien's voice let out a mutter.

“Seven Stars Encircling The Moon.”

Chapter 286 Racing [10]

Three pitch black stars that were crackling with deathly lightning. Three shining golden stars that were ablaze with sunflames. A single star in between them that fused the properties of both elements as if they were yin and yang.

And those seven stars encircled a moon that fluctuated with the light of spatial mana, being so densely packed that even the usually colorless mana gained a hazy glow.

Damien's fist looked like the revolving orbit of planetary masses around a sun. It was a truly mesmerizing sight.

But to Polius, it was hell. He couldn't see the beauty in the attack. He could only feel the palpable waves of destruction that spread from its surface.

His dark material sprung into action, becoming a densely packed shield in front of him that bore the impact of Damien's fist.

But this attack wasn't simple enough to be blocked by a mere shield.

A soul injury like what Damien had just sustained would leave most people incapacitated for unknown periods of time. Even if they were able to function, it was impossible for them to fight with their full power.

That was what both Polius and the dark material thought as they saw the attack flying towards them. By the time they sensed the destructive waves, it was already too late.

A massive explosion incomparable to any of those before shook the world.

The seven stars were already unstable due to the volatile elements that formed them, especially the seventh star that fused both elements.

The only thing that was keeping them in check was the silvery spatial moon that encompassed Damien's fist.

But when the moon imploded, the stars around it began to collide with each other. With each collision, the explosive force that rocked the atmosphere grew exponentially stronger.

The ground rolled like it was made of liquid, forming tsunamis of earth that bore down on the surrounding few kilometers. Space cracked into pieces and tried its best to repair itself, but every time a new star collided with the rest, the cracks were only blown open wider.

Polius was forced to stand in the middle of the scene of calamity. He still couldn't move his body. Truth be told, he had injured his own soul to strike Damien's. Otherwise, there was no way he could create a force that could surpass the physical plane and impact the soul.

That was the naked truth. It was also part of the reason Damien never encountered soul-based techniques before.

A mortal was never meant to sense or make use of their soul. Their soul was still in its growth phase, unable to fully blossom without the feedback from a Universe Baptism.

Since Polius abused the fact that the dark material was formed from a portion of a higher being to cast a soul attack, he naturally had to make a sacrifice. And that sacrifice was a piece of his soul.

Unfortunately, he was more normal in comparison to Damien. He was still bearing the brunt of the soul-rending pain. He knew that even if he escaped this battle alive, he'd have to recuperate for many weeks before he could function normally again.

And so, he could only rely on the dark material to bear the destruction he was being forced into. Wave after wave of destructive force impacted his body, bypassing even the dark materials protection. Combined with the pain from his soul, he was enduring the cruelest torture imaginable.

But if it wasn't for the dark material, his body would have already become ashes.

Finally, the colliding stars met with the seventh star, and the implosion of the spatial moon completed.

Wap!

It was an awkward sound to say the least. The deafening sounds of explosions were more domineering, but this unusual sound seemed to trump them even though it was much softer.

Polius was already disoriented, but his mind became blank when that sound entered his ears. In the next second, a suction force erupted in front of him and threatened to drag him in.

A small black dot had formed at the point of collision, and it was that dot that emitted the suction force. Even Damien felt like he was being pulled into it.

He hastily revolved his mana and constantly teleported until he was a safe distance away. He was lucky he reacted in time, because not even a second later the suction force seemed to multiply a hundredfold.

The rolling tides of earth were pulled back to their original position before vanishing into the black dot. Even though it was kilometers worth of rock and debris, the dot swallowed it like it was nothing.

The space that was almost repaired no longer had the chance to do so, as even space itself was being consumed by that black dot.

From the effects on the environment, one could infer how abysmal Polius's situation was.

The dark material clawed at the ground as it tried to gain footing, but it was no use. The ground that it latched onto was easily consumed by the dot.

It desperately moved back and tried to retreat, but it had missed the opportunity Damien had taken. Retreat was no longer an option.

So, it decided to fight. The dark material billowed out to a scale it had never reached before. The blackness in it was much much darker.

Polius's body couldn't contain a dark material with this much power. It was no longer restricting itself to the strength of its host.

The only thing the dark material cared for at the moment was survival.

The raging dark material covered the black dot with its blackness, attempting to stop its suction with sheer force.

Crack!

A small crack appeared on the black dot as the dark material continued to pressure it.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Massive impacts rang out. The dark material had been reinvigorated by the crack on the black dot and became even more volatile in its attacks.

The cracks on the dot began to spread and the suction force began to weaken with time. As things stood, it looked like the dark material would win out.

However, there was one factor that forced that outcome to change.

The dark material was a parasitic entity. Without a host, it couldn't survive.

And what would happen if the dark material overexerted itself while ignoring its host's limits?

The force the dark material had used to combat the black dot's suction had already entered the realm of 4th class. Although it could've used 3rd class force to achieve the same thing, it didn't have the time to do so if it didn't want to be consumed.

That was the consequence of being in such close proximity to what was essentially a miniature black hole.

While the difference between the two was only a single class, there was a vast difference between someone who had undergone Universe Baptism and someone who hadn't.

When Damien's gaze landed on Polius's body, he was shocked to say the least.

The man was incredibly robust before. As someone who had practiced martial arts diligently for a long period of time, it was only natural.

Polius had a body that most professional bodybuilders would commit genocide to have.

But now, he was nothing more than a husk. His body had become as thin as a sheet of paper, where even a slight gust of wind would have him flying through the air.

His tanned skin had become an odd greyish-black color akin to a wilted corpse, and his eyes had sunken to the point where they looked hollow.

If it wasn't for the slight hint of life force Damien sensed, he would think the other man was already dead.

Well, he wasn't far away from it.

Polius was only seconds away from death due to the overexertion of the dark material. The dark material, no matter how strong its original power was, needed to use Polius's power to exhibit its strength.

And so, it had leached his lifeforce to save itself from being consumed by the miniature black hole.

The dark material began to wither as it lost its source of energy, but the miniature black hole also began to disappear. In the end, it had barely managed to survive.

Or at least, that's what it thought.

As Polius's withered body collapsed to the floor, the dark material detached itself and began moving in a separate direction.

It was being summoned back to the being it originated from.

But before it could answer that summon, it found its path blocked by another body.

The body of the man who had put it in such a pitiful state.

And before it could react, Damien reached his hand out and grabbed it.

“Devour.”

Chapter 287 Betrayal [1]

Damien didn't even have the energy to stand up straight as his Void Essence wrapped around the dark material and turned it into essence for him to digest.

The second he finished casting the devour skill, his body collapsed to the floor. He didn't even bother to check what kind of benefits he received from the dark material. He didn't even think of the consequences that'd come with the fact that he devoured a portion of a higher existence.

He had been holding on due to his sheer willpower and some unknown force that allowed him to keep his rationality after the soul attack, but he was still human. There was no way he'd be free from the side effects.

As the adrenaline rush wore off, a blood-curdling pain began to wreck his body. It was a level of pain he'd never experienced before. And when Damien was the person in question, it could be inferred how severe the pain was.

When pain came from his physical body, it was easy to endure. He knew that at some point, it'd end under the comfort of his regeneration skill. However, this new pain wasn't something regeneration could heal.

His head felt like it was being split in half by a cleaver. Vertigo began to set in, causing the world around him to spin as if it was a Beyblade. Along with this disorienting and nauseating feeling, there was a searing pain that spread throughout every part of his body, even though his body itself was relatively uninjured.

There had been a hole in his stomach at one point due to the black dragon that attacked along with the white dragon, but it had already healed.

Damien had the urge to shut his eyes and call it a day, but he was well aware that his battle was just one of many. He couldn't allow himself to stay incapacitated for long.

But in the end, he couldn't defeat that urge. Soul injuries were truly much more frightening than physical injuries.

Luckily, he still had his wits about him. Damien vanished from his position and appeared within a hidden corner of the Sanctuary before he succumbed to his fatigue. There was no way he'd allow himself to be vulnerable as unsafe as a chaotic battlefield, even if he was many kilometers away from it.

‘Just 5 minutes wouldn't hurt anyone...’

Even as his body shut down and his mind hit zero, Damien could clearly feel it. His heart was racing.

The main battlefield was just as chaotic as it had always been. Elemental spells flew threw the air and blades constantly clashed against each other, filling the area with a cacophony of sound.

“Flame burst!”

“Watch out behind you!”

“I’ll cover it! Wind Curtain!”

The shouts of the geniuses of the 3000 Beast Mountain Range were drowned out by the sheer amount of noise, but they somehow still managed to communicate.

Outperforming everyone’s expectations, 40 of the original 50 geniuses had managed to stay alive until this point. As for the Demon army, many of the Captains had died either at the hands of geniuses or by stray attacks that wandered the battlefield.

But the loss of a few Captians in no way affected the overall strength of the Demons. After all, their Generals were all still living. And the number of generals alone was 50, rivaling the original number of geniuses.

“Demonic Judgement!”

Dozens of pitch-black swords formed in the sky before charging into the crowd. As expected of a Demonic Judgement, there was no distinction between allies and enemies. The swords cut through the crowded battlefield and slayed anything that stood in their path.

“Light Barrier!”

“Water Curtain!”

A plethora of defensive skills and barriers were layered on top of each other, managing to narrowly block the charging swords. In response, the geniuses turned their gaze to the Demon General who released the swords.

He didn’t even try to hide his presence, looking down upon the humans as if they were ants. But his arrogance wasn’t unjustified. Even if he alone would perish to their numbers, they didn’t lose out in that department at all.

A group of five geniuses split apart from the main group and rushed the Demon General, surrounding him and caging him into one location.

“Spear Rain!”

A rain of light spears appeared in the sky and fell onto the Demon General. The General deftly moved his body as if he was dancing, dodging every spear that fell.

“Thundering Wave!”

A dense mist formed around the group before coagulating into many droplets of water. The water joined together into a wave tens of feet tall, crashing towards the agile Demon General.

The Demon General's eyes moved towards the attack, his hands following soon after.

“Chaotic Outburst.”

Inky black mana coated his hands before pulsing outwards like a shockwave. Although the attack didn't seem special, when the shockwave collided with the wave, it easily blasted it apart before it ever reached the General's position.

The Demon General turned to the man who released the spear rain and charged, his mana enhancing his agility and allowing him to reach his target in an instant.

“Die!”

The General's nails elongated into claws and swept towards the man's throat. The man, however, had put too much focus into controlling his spear rain, leaving him unable to dodge.

“James!”

“Protect him!”

“Entangling Vines!”

The ground below the Demon General’s feet burst apart as vines with the thickness of human arms emerged and twisted around the Demon General’s feet.

Although the Demon General was easily able to deal with the vines, they had successfully confined him for a second, which gave the spear rain genius a chance to escape.

The genius touched his neck slightly, noticing the small trail of blood was leaking from it. If his comrades were even a bit later...

But he didn’t have time to think about it for too long before a soft light covered him. His wounds began healing at a rapid pace. He cast a grateful look at the woman who had healed him before turning his attention back to the battle at hand.

“Tch!”

Seeing this scene, Demon General clicked his tongue. Individually, he far outclassed every single one of his opponents. But the synergy they showed in battle had allowed them to tie him down even with their disadvantages.

There were five of them and one of him, and with them being spread out so far, it was impossible for him to target them all at once. He was a combatant mainly focused on speed and assassination. Although he had moves like the Demonic Judgement, it would take him time to conjure them. And he didn’t have time at all.

With the spear rain genius escaping the General's grasp, the group was able to once again start their assault. They had one strategy and one strategy only. To wear down their opponent until he was a pig on the chopping block.

"Spear Rain!"

Another rain of spears soon fell onto the battlefield. The surroundings were filled with multiple scenes similar to this one.

Groups of three to five geniuses broke apart from the main group periodically to barrage the Demon Generals, while the main group focused on razing the Captains to the ground so there wouldn't be any distractions later in the battle.

It wasn't a bad strategy, but they were far outnumbered. If any of the unoccupied Demon Generals decided to step forth, their momentum would easily be disrupted.

After all, there were only 40 of them. With the small groups continuously splitting off, only about 10 of the demon generals were being held at bay. The other 40 were simply watching the battle in amusement.

They had no reason to interfere. It would just waste their energy for nothing. They would at most send the occasional skill into the crowd to kill a few geniuses, but that was it.

The battle was grim. The geniuses were well aware of that. But they didn't back away. They weren't courageous and they weren't righteous. The reason they stayed was simple.

Their stars; which had originally been stuck at the lowest Silver level for many months, had already broken through to the Gold level and were on their way to turning Purple. Was there any other motivation needed for them to continue?

The fates of those who died were none of their concern. All that they needed to be concerned with was their own safety!

With this kind of mentality, the morale of the geniuses didn't lower no matter how many they lost. The battle was able to continue raging at full force for many minutes.

However, their mana reserves were far from limitless. In fact, many of the geniuses in the main group were already reaching their limits...

Chapter 288 Betrayal [2]

The geniuses and even the Demons were so focused on the ongoing fight that they weren't able to notice the changes to the overall environment around them.

The battle had started in the middle of the day, so the sun was still high in the sky, casting plenty of light upon the ground. But at some point, the light of the sun had begun to dim.

A blackness overtook it, causing dusk to descend upon the brightly lit battlefield. Shadows quietly spread through the earth below them, and before long, the entire area was encompassed.

In a mere instant, it became night. For the first time since the chaotic battle began, the Demon Generals lousing around in the back had grim looks on their faces.

“Swamp of Darkness.”

A crisp voice flowed through the air like a melody. The small scuffles and major waves taking place on the battlefield came to a half, as if everyone present was mesmerized by the voice.

“Arise.”

The Swamp of Darkness had already spread its reach, but it wasn't an offensive ability. Rather, it was just setting the stage for what was to come.

When the single word was spoken, the darkness began to move in strange patterns as if it was alive. From within it, tens of figures began to rise as if they were waking up from a prolonged slumber.

“W-what is...”

“Those are...!”

Both the geniuses and the Demon Generals were stumped when they saw the beings that rose from the darkness. For the geniuses, they were merely surprised at the power that they had never seen before, and wary about which side it belonged to.

As for the Demon Generals, they felt a much more visceral fear. After all, the figures rising from the depths were Demon Generals just like them!

However, these Demon Generals barely bore any resemblance to their own race anymore. They had become one with the darkness they emerged from, becoming slaves to its will.

“Go.”

The melodious yet sinister voice rang out again. On its command, the Shadow Generals flashed into the crowd and began to wantonly slaughter the Demon Captains within.

But that wasn't the terrifying part. Each time a Demon Captain fell, their bodies would sink into the Swamp of Darkness. And seconds later, a shadowy counterpart would emerge and join the ongoing slaughter.

With the Shadow Captains joining their ranks, the Shadow Generals no longer focused on the small fries. They turned into fleeting shadows and arrived in front of the Demon Generals on the backlines, immediately engaging in combat.

Blades of darkness and constructs made of the same mana flew threw the air, slicing at the Demon Generals. They, who had been unprepared for the sudden change of events, failed to react in time.

Heads flew into the air.

Just like that, 5 Demon Generals had died.

“H-how is this...”

“There's no way...”

The geniuses were shocked beyond belief. Those Demon Generals that they had to form groups to fight, the ones that they desperately resisted. They had been slaughtered like they were mere abominations.

It was only when those Generals reappeared as shadows that the geniuses regained their wits.

“They’re on our side!”

Someone shouted. This shout set off a chain reaction. When everyone realized that they didn’t need to fear the shadows or the domain they’d been encased in, they began to fight again with renewed vigor.

“Don’t let those shadows steal our contribution points!”

“Let’s go!”

The darkness was once again filled with the light of elemental mana. The forces of the Demon army slowly began to dwindle.

Somewhere within the domain of darkness, ten Demon Generals stood together and watched the proceedings. These ten had never participated in the fight since the beginning. In fact, the geniuses didn’t even know that there were actually 60 Demon Generals instead of 50!

“I didn’t think the situation would become like this.” One of them pointed out. Astonishment was clear in his tone.

“Right. When the King gave us our orders, I was sure this was a suicide mission. But it no longer seems to be the case.”

“Those shadows seem to be unforgiving, though. How can we be sure that they won’t target us?”

“Our location has most likely already been exposed since we are within the caster’s domain. There’s no other choice. We must take action.”

“You don’t mean...”

A series of gasps rang out as the others realized what the Demon General was implying.

“We can’t! You know just as well as we do what will happen to us if we do!”

“But we’ll only be punished if someone finds out about it. Only the Apostles had record crystals with them, so the proceedings on the main battlefield are still unknown to the rest of the Apostles at the base.”

“That’s...true. But still. If we do it, there’s no going back. The stench of traitors is something that can’t be washed away. The second we return to the city, we will be charged.”

“Was returning ever an option? Returning would only implicate the King. And are we so ungrateful that we would cause trouble for him? Even after everything he’s done for us?”

“No. Don’t even suggest it.”

“Sigh. I never thought things would turn out this way. But, it has always been our fate. The King took us in because we share his ideologies. None of us want to continue being slaves for a being that isn’t even one of us. The regime needs to end at some point.”

“Ha! You talk as if we’re actually rebelling! But that had never been what we are doing. Rather than rebelling, we are just taking back what’s ours.”

“Anyway, enough of this. Judging by the amount of power the owner of this domain possesses, at least one of the Commanders has already died.”

“The power of outsiders has truly been underestimated.”

“But this one isn’t the Stormbringer. The King mentioned that the Stormbringer was a man, but the owner of the voice earlier was clearly a woman.”

“She must be one of his associates. If we can manage to earn her trust, then she will be able to introduce us to the Stormbringer.”

“Right. There’s no need for any more talk. Let us move.”

The group of Demon Generals turned into flashes of light before appearing on the battlefield. It had already become a mess while they were discussing, with the Demons dying left and right.

The Shadow army now had over twenty Demon Generals within it, but nobody doubted the fact that there could've been more if the shadows decided to be aggressive. It was clear that the owner of the domain was allowing the normal geniuses to grab their contribution points.

“You guys! What are you doing standing still?! Come help me fend this thing off!”

An enraged shout entered the ears of the group. When they turned their attention, they saw a group of 5 Demon Generals fiercely resisting shadows that used to be their comrades.

The Demon Generals looked at each other and nodded. In the next second, they arrived next to the group that was being attacked.

“Good that you're here! Now, let's work together and—”

The Demon General's eyes widened while he was speaking. His words cut off as blood rushed up his throat. When he looked down, he saw a black dagger pierced through his heart.

“You...!”

He couldn't say anything else before he collapsed to the ground. His expression was twisted with a sense of betrayal even after death.

Soon, four more thudding sounds rang out as the rest of the Demon Generals were slain. Each of the Generals from the defecting group had a slightly uncomfortable expression on their face, but they had already hardened their hearts.

Seeing that the Shadow Generals in the vicinity weren't attacking them, the Defecting Generals nodded at each other and set their sights on another group.

Even if they weren't necessary for this battle to end, they would still do their best. After all, they had no way of knowing if the domain owner would kill them if they were half-hearted.

Soon enough, cries of betrayal and anguish filled the domain, surpassing the sounds of even the rest of the mayhem that was taking place within.

Outside the black dome that had encompassed the area, Qing Tan watched in with a smile.

"King...Stormbringer...Apostles...how interesting!"

A charming smile decorated her face as she watched the carnage she had induced. Not to mention, it looked like her Shadow army was set for another big expansion!

Chapter 289 Demon King [1]

Black blood splashed on the ground and contributed to the sea of blood that had already formed. But since the environment itself was black, it would've been barely noticeable if the individuals within couldn't feel the viscous liquid around their ankles.

The result was inconceivable. Given time, regardless of what strategies the geniuses decided to use, they would've been overwhelmed by the numbers and power of the Demon army.

But unfortunately, reality was cruel. At the last moment, they had received a helping hand from a genius that far outstripped them in power.

In fact, it wasn't even fair to call it a single genius anymore. Even though she was one person, she was a walking army on her own.

The battle within the darkness domain raged on as the geniuses became more invigorated with every drop of black blood that fell to the ground. They didn't even notice that the number of Generals had been dropping steadily from some time ago even without their interference.

But the Demon Generals weren't just going to allow themselves to get slaughtered. When they realized they had no hope of survival, their resistance only became fiercer.

They charged at the geniuses like crazed beasts, capitalizing on their powerful physical bodies to tear into their flesh. Inky black mana formed massive torrents that clashed against the walls of the domain.

“Blood Sea!”

“Demon Torture Seal!”

The sea of blood that was forming on the ground rose up as if it was alive, pouncing towards the crowd of geniuses. Whenever a drop of blood managed to land on their bodies, it would sear into their flesh and burrow into their sensitive organs.

That was when the second skill took root. The demon blood that entered the geniuses' bodies began to burn. The small drops of black blood turned into miniature spiders that proliferated through the victims' bodies.

Each movement the spiders made would cause untold pain to the ones inflicted by their curse. Their bodies were soon turned into soulless husks that still had twisted expressions of fear and agony on their dried-up faces.

The attack was extremely powerful. It was the combined force of multiple Demon Generals together, making it something the geniuses couldn't resist at all.

But it wasn't as if the Generals didn't pay a price to do so. They contributed their own blood and lifeforce to the raging blood sea, leaving them in a crippled state after the attack ended.

They already knew they would die today. If they were going to do so, they'd at least take a portion of these unworthy freeloaders together with them!

If it wasn't for the hidden protection of the 10 Defected Demon Generals, almost all of the geniuses would've been wiped out in that single attack.

It was only natural that the Generals thought of them as freeloaders. Even with all the power they put into the attack, the domain they were trapped in didn't budge. Compared to that person, these geniuses were nothing.

But the geniuses didn't know this. Or rather, they chose to avoid this truth so their pride wouldn't be hurt. Instead, they vented their hidden frustrations by slaying the crippled Demon Generals and moving on to their next targets.

While the battle slowly reached its end, a trail of blazing flames streaked across the horizon and quickly reached the outskirts of the darkness domain.

“Hey! You’re finally here!” Qing Tan happily greeted when she saw Feng Qing’er’s face.

Feng Qing’er nodded absentmindedly while gazing at the darkness domain. As someone with similar strength to Qing Tan, she was clearly able to see what was happening inside. And the sight baffled her.

Qing Tan’s affinity being darkness was a widely known fact. It didn’t surprise her that Qing Tan was able to set up such a massive domain. However, the Shadow army was a different story.

Necromancy was already an uncommon ability to see, but a vein of necromancy like Qing Tan’s was even more. From the looks of it, she was only using the shadows she collecting from the Demons, but Feng Qing’er knew that there had to be others she had killed and added to her army in the outside world.

Not to mention, if Qing Tan was here, then the Commander that she was facing was...

‘This girl is far stronger than we ever gave her credit for.’

Feng Qing’er realized that it was a belated conclusion, but she couldn’t help it. Qing Tan had been extremely careful about concealing her strength. If it wasn’t for the fact that she was openly showing some of her cards at the moment, there was no way Feng Qing’er would have ever known.

‘But, I’m not so bad myself.’

If it was before the recent battle, she wouldn't have stood a chance against Qing Tan. The flames she relied on wouldn't have held a candle to Qing Tan's darkness.

But now? She couldn't be sure. The Reincarnation Flames were the bane of dark energies. They specialized in mediating Life and Death, as well as cleansing evil presences. These flames gave her a certain amount of confidence against opponents like Qing Tan.

Turning her attention back to the smiling girl, she shook off her thoughts. She didn't think there'd come a day where they had to fight to the death, so there was no need to dwell on it.

"That guy hadn't come back yet?" She asked as she noticed the lack of a certain obnoxious man in the area.

"Nope! Speaking of, where do you think he went?"

"He's probably still caught up with the Commander. As expected, he was weaker than me!"

Qing Tan giggled. She was sure that even Feng Qing'er wasn't arrogant enough to believe her own words, but she didn't point it out. There was no need to embarrass her.

"Oh right, what's that in your hand?" Qing Tan asked, changing the subject. But she was indeed curious. She didn't notice it before, but there was an odd lump in Feng Qing'er's hand.

"Oh this? Remember that ugly bitch from before?"

Feng Qing'er smirked as she threw the lump on the ground. When Qing Tan observed it with her awareness, she was able to see a slight resemblance to the physique of a demon within the lump.

But it was far too disfigured to distinguish the actual demon it was. It barely even qualified as a lump of flesh anymore. The fact that Feng Qing'er had turned that Demon Commander into such a thing clearly showed how annoyed she had been at the woman's constant provocations.

"She was so obsessed with her beauty that even at the end of her life she was screaming about how she would steal my face for herself. I figured that the best way to get rid of the problem was to make it so she no longer had to worry about the concept of beauty at all!" Feng Qing'er explained cheerfully.

Indeed, an unknown object wouldn't have to worry about beauty at all. Qing Tan couldn't argue with the logic even if it was evidently convoluted.

The two girls descended into silence as they watched the ongoing battle within the darkness domain. Not long after, the final Demon General met his end.

When the darkness domain receded, only 20 out of the 50 geniuses that were present at the beginning were alive. And every single one of them had a shining purple star, perhaps even close to reaching the Black Star level.

Chapter 290 Demon King [2]

The two girls didn't care about those geniuses at all. By the time the darkness domain disappeared, they had already vanished from the area.

Far away, they reappeared. In front of them, there were 10 Demon Generals who hadn't died during the war. Each one of them was currently on their knees, not daring to look up at the two girls.

“So? Who's your king? What's the Stormbringer? What about the Apostles? Tell me! Tell me!”

Qing Tan fired off a series of questions. The previous battle wasn't very exciting to her until these ten Demon Generals defected, so her curiosity towards them was great.

“Miss, we will tell you everything. However, we must first speak to the Stormbringer. We are not allowed to disobey orders from our King.”

Qing Tan's eyes became cold. “You won't tell me?”

A gloomy aura erupted from her body, immediately suppressing the Demon Generals until their bodies were implanted into the ground below. But none of them spoke a word.

Were they afraid of Qing Tan? That was guaranteed. They had seen her power first hand. They didn't even know when or how they were transported out of the battlefield and to this secluded location.

But would they go against their King's orders because of their fear? The answer was a resounding no. They would rather die than do anything against their King's will.

Qing Tan's eyes gradually became indifferent. “Fine. I just need to bring you to him, right? That's easy enough. But if you dare misbehave...”

A grin surfaced on her face, causing the Demon Generals to involuntarily shudder. They nodded their heads like pecking chicks while sweating profusely. As long as it wasn't against their King's orders, they wouldn't even dare to think about acting up in front of the Devil in front of them.

As Qing Tan proceeded to ignore the Demon Generals, Feng Qing'er raised a question.

"So? What's the story here?"

She hadn't been present until the end of the battle within the darkness domain, and by that point, Qing Tan had already removed the Demon Generals from the area. She was definitely curious about how they ended up like this and why they were being so respectful.

And after hearing about what happened from Qing Tan; her curiosity grew even more. She was beginning to understand Qing Tan's actions a little.

"The Stormbringer must be that guy, right?"

"Yup! You saw how he took care of the abominations when we first met. It's pretty obvious they're referring to him."

"Hmph. If it's that guy, then it makes some sense. He seems to know a lot more than we do about the overall situation."

"Oh, by the way, why do you keep calling him 'that guy' instead of saying his name?"

Qing Tan smiled mischievously.

“W-what are you saying all of a sudden?! It doesn’t mean anything at all!”

“I never said it meant anything though~?”

Feng Qing’er blushed at her teasing. She wasn’t even lying when she said it didn’t mean anything. She just ended up referring to him as such for so long that it became a habit.

But she was weak to teasing from someone who would shamelessly push things like Qing Tan, so she ended up only making herself look more suspicious.

“Oh, right. You guys, what’s with that black substance the Demon Commanders were using during the battle? You can at least tell us that much, no?”

Feng Qing’er managed to divert the conversation to something else. She had been wondering about it for a while now, since she had almost been consumed by it. It didn’t feel like something natural.

“That’s…”

The Demon Generals hesitated. But the second Qing Tan shot them a cold glare, they began to stammer out words.

“W-we can’t talk about it. It’s impossible. Please forgive us!”

Qing Tan’s eyes sharpened as she noticed something.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t.” The Demon General responded firmly.

“Hmm...”

Feng Qing’er fell into thought. That entity obviously wasn’t Kroa’s power. This much she knew. Unfortunately, she wasn’t able to stop it from fleeing after she killed Kroa, so she couldn’t figure out much else.

Unlike Damien, these two hadn’t taken the time to interrogate or gain information from the Demons at all. Until this point, the only contact they had with the race was through battle. Due to this, they didn’t have the necessary information to infer about higher-level truths.

The girls ignored the topic since it couldn’t be helped and began asking the Demon Generals more miscellaneous questions for information. Like this, they were able to gather similar information to what Damien learned through Elitra.

After they finished, they began moving towards the location where Damien had been battling Polius many minutes prior.

“Haa...”

Within the Sanctuary, Damien was lying on the soft grass, his breathing gentle and his eyes closed.

He had woken up not long ago, but he still hadn't opened his eyes. The waves of fatigue had calmed down to the point where it was bearable, but he still wasn't completely fine.

‘I’ll probably see a drop in my combat power until I can get this healed...but my assassination strategy should still work. It’s a shame though.’

If only he had been more knowledgeable about the soul, he would’ve been able to prepare or even counter the attack. But what’s done was done. There was no use regretting it.

Now that he was in a safer environment, he sent his awareness into his body to check his condition. He wanted to see if he could scour his soul or at least find its location.

His awareness spread through his body, highlighting every single cell for Damien to observe as he pleased. Unfortunately, there was no such thing as a ‘soul gate’ that connected his physical body to his soul as he hoped.

‘Or maybe I’m just not strong enough yet.’

In the end, it still came down to strength. Damien sighed as he sat up and stretched his body. He spread his senses through the Sanctuary to see what was happening in the other areas.

He was currently in a separated space he created as a training ground for himself to use so he could be destructive without running the risk of harming Little Xue, but since the Sanctuary shared a bond with him, he was able to peruse its entire area without problems.

The total size of the Sanctuary wasn't huge, but it wasn't small either. If it came down to it, there was enough space for a civilization of hundreds of thousands of people to bloom within.

But Damien hadn't made use of most of the Sanctuary's space yet. He mainly used the miniature pocket spaces he had created for various purposes.

When he spread his senses, a smile immediately surfaced on his face. The first scene he saw was Little Xue happily running through the tall grass fields around her treehouse and playing with some of the elemental spirits that had been born in the realm.

Her bell-like laughter and cheerful aura were enough to soothe his fatigued mind greatly.

As for the elemental spirits, even Damien wasn't sure how they came into existence. He was sure they weren't there when the Sanctuary was first established, but at some point, they had just shown up.

Perhaps it was due to the high concentration of elemental essence within the Sanctuary due to its connection with the Void. That was the best guess Damien could make.

But the spirits weren't harmful, so he didn't mind them. They also kept Little Xue company while he inevitably had to move from battlefield to battlefield.

In fact, they seemed to be particularly fond of her.

'She must have some kind of talent.'

If she started cultivating, he knew she'd be labeled a genius and carefully nurtured regardless of the force she entered. But he had no plans to force her into it.

She was still far too young. Until she was at least 10, he would bar her from partaking in it. But after that point, if she really wanted to cultivate, he wouldn't spare any expense to help her become powerful.

As he watched the elemental spirits dance through the air, an odd thought came to mind.

'Sigh, when am I going to get a Little Ancestor Spirit that guides me in cultivation and has all the answers to my questions? Tsk, what a shame!'

It was a thought that'd make millions of people vomit blood. This guy who already had so many benefits wanted a walking encyclopedia as well?! Could he be any more shameless?!

Luckily, those people weren't present.

Damien soon flashed away from his location, arriving at the field where Xue'er was playing.

