

Void 431

Chapter 431 Xue Clan [1]

Somewhere in a quiet forest of the Empyrean Dragon Sect Ruins, two women appeared from thin air.

"Hmm, this place doesn't look too interesting," Ruyue commented as she looked around.

Rose raised her brow. "I mean, it's not like you're wrong, but what were you expecting to happen the very second we entered this realm?"

Ruyue shrugged her shoulders and spoke. "I don't know. The last secret realm I went to dropped me inside of a raging blizzard where even I could freeze. I heard Damien was dropped into a pit of lava at the same time. Compared to that, this is a bit tame."

Rose smiled wryly. "Yeah, I think that's because the last secret realm you went to is crazy. There won't be much danger to us here, it's better to call this a treasure hunt than a secret realm expedition."

"Why is that?" Ruyue questioned. She and Damien were truly uninformed about the current situation. They simply came when Tian Yang called and went with the flow.

Rose, however, had been drilled with the information multiple times by the Supreme Fairy Paradise Master. Even if she wanted to forget, her brain wouldn't let her.

"This sect's collapse should've been around 10,000 years ago during the last Great War. That's why it's titled an Ancient Sect. However, the rate at which this secret realm opens is actually relatively common. It isn't like it's only opened once or twice during that timeframe.

"And during these previous openings, all of the previously mapped areas have been mostly swept clean by previous generations. Due to this, there is an abundance of treasure, but a lack of danger to match it."

"What about the unexplored areas then? Why don't we just go to one of those?"

Rose grinned. "As expected of my second sister. Right, going to an unexplored area sounds like a whole lot more fun than just wasting our time idly in the safety net our predecessors spread. The problem is, we only have a week until the entrance closes. This is why there's still so much unexplored area in the first place."

Ruyue nodded in agreement. "Since it's like that, let's first get a grasp of our general location. If there is an unexplored area close enough, we can delve into it. If there isn't, we can just spend this time relaxing before we return."

Rose also nodded and took out the map the Paradise Master had given her. While she looked at it, Ruyue spread her awareness into the surroundings.

As she did so, she encountered a delightful surprise. Her eyes locked in one direction, completely forgetting about the plan of action she made before.

"Actually, let's do something else first." She said piercingly, causing Rose to look over.

Ruyue's lips spread into a wild grin. It was her first time making such an expression, but she realized why Damien made it so often. Sometimes, there were uncontainable feelings that could only be expressed by grinning so wildly.

"It's time to go hunting."

Iceflames decorated the soles of her feet, combusting heavily and causing her to fly into the air. Rose looked up in surprise, but just shrugged in the end.

'Well, it's not like there's anything for me to do. I wonder what second sister saw for her to be reacting so violently...looks like a ton of fun.'

With a smile on her face, Rose soon followed Ruyue. The duo flew rapidly for a few tens of kilometers before they finally came to a halt. Rose quickly concealed them in the air, a group of five people walking on the ground below them right as she did so."

"Hm? I could've sworn I sensed something." The one at the front commented.

"You're always like this. There must be something wrong with your sense of smell." A girl behind him quipped back.

"Tch. Why don't you lead the group then?"

"It's fine, that kind of troublesome work can be left to you."

"You two, stop arguing. We have a goal in this secret realm, remember?" A third one chimed in.

"Right, we're supposed to enjoy this secret realm exploration and look for fortuitous encounters to boost our growth, yet we've suddenly been given an annoying task like this one." The girl sighed in annoyance.

"It's all that bitch's fault. If she hadn't shown up, the elders wouldn't have gone on such a rampage."

"It's not just that she showed up, she showed up hand in hand with some random man. If he had taken her virginity already, all the elders' plans would've been ruined."

"Right, but before they could even do anything about it, that asshole had to put on such a show." The first man growled.

The Xue Clan's little princess, the Clan Leader's first and only daughter with his first wife, and the one with the most talent in the Xue Clan's younger generation.

Even if they had blood ties, there wasn't a single man in the Xue Clan who didn't have feelings for her. After all, the Xue Clan was one that subtly promoted inbreeding so that they could keep their lineage pure

But these young masters who had been fantasizing about saving the abandoned princess and making her theirs, they were forced to witness her together with another man.

And an outstanding one at that.

He had crushed Wang Tianhe like he was kicking a baby. It wasn't even funny. Perhaps someone like Long Chen would disdain being seen on the level of Wang Tianhe, but besides those insane geniuses, Wang Tianhe represented the peak of the younger generation

Yet, he was manhandled with no effort at all. Even while Wang Chen pressured that man, he didn't seem like he was affected at all.

"Dammit! Just who was that guy?!" Xue Liubai growled.

"Didn't you hear it? He's the Celestial Star Palace Grand Elder's second disciple."

"Even then! Where the hell did he come from?! Apparently, even the elders have no information on him. That level of genius shouldn't be unknown."

"Tch. Why are you caring about him so much? Our task is to eliminate the little princess. If you hate him so much, why don't you present him her head and watch him fall into despair?" The girl suggested.

"Hahahahaha!"

Laughter like wind chimes in the wind filled the atmosphere. Rose removed her concealment as she laughed, unable to hold herself back anymore. Even Ruyue had a smirk on her face.

Not only did these kids actually think they had what it took to kill her off easily, they thought she'd let them talk such bullshit about her man? It seems she had been hidden from the world for too long, since even insignificant rabble like them could badmouth her as they pleased.

"You lot, what are your affiliations?" Ruyue asked coldly.

The girl amongst them, Xue Li, sneered in response. "Have you been stuck in your turtle shell for so long that you've forgotten your own clan?"

Ruyue gazed at her with a deadpan expression. "If you're going to say something stupid, I'd rather you don't talk at all. Instead, one of the rest of you tell me what your affiliations inside the clan are, since apparently I need to spell it out for you."

The third man amongst them spoke indifferently. "I am Xue Qingshan, son of Second Elder Xue Pengge. As for them, she is Xue Li, the Second Elder's first daughter, and he is Xue Liubai, the Clan Leader's fourth son."

Ruyue's expression became uninterested. "I see, so it's really just a group of small fries. That brat Xue Feng isn't even here, nor is Xue Yue. Tell me, are they with the second group?"

Since there were only five young Xue Clan geniuses present, the other five must've gone separately. Considering Xue Yue and Xue Feng's personalities, it was highly likely that these five were discarded as useless.

And seeing how they averted their gaze when she questioned them, Ruyue nodded her head. "Okay. Since it's impossible for you to know where those five are, there's no more use in keeping you alive. It's a shame, though. I really want to see the elders' expressions when your life tablets break."

Without another word, Ruyue flashed away and appeared within the ranks of her opponents. And in the next second, an icy hell descended upon them.

Chapter 432 Xue Clan [2]

Outside the secret realm, the crowds that had gathered didn't disperse even though the relevant parties had already long since entered.

The ones who were remaining were mostly the elders and heads of various clans and sects. Since the secret realm opening was only a week long, they set up camp outside instead of wasting time on leaving and returning.

Due to this, various constructs now decorated the once-empty plain. Of them, the five massive objects floating in the sky were the most eye-catching.

Two were castles, one having a gold and red theme while the other was black and blue. These were the temporary abodes of the Jade Heavenly Palace and Celestial Star Palace.

Next to them stood a massive lifelike dragon and an equally massive Celestial Vine, where the Divine Dragon Temple and Supreme Fairy Paradise resided.

As for the last flying construct, it was a large lotus flower where the Azure Lotus Sect, the often forgotten 'fifth' of the Five Great Sects, resided.

Underneath these five flying constructs, there were tens of earthen constructs of differing levels of grandiosity. Among these was an ice palace that seemed to want to compete with those palaces in the sky.

Within that ice palace, furious roars could be heard.

"WHO DARED?! WHO DARED KILL MY SON AND DAUGHTER?!"

The Second Elder of the Xue Clan roared furiously as he looked at the shattered life tablets in his hand. He was simply relaxing and waiting for this usually calm secret realm to end and for his children to return after gaining their benefits, but within seconds, both of their life tablets shattered back to back.

His mana raged, threatening to shatter the ice palace around him. The blazing aura of a mid-level 4th class being caused many maids and servants to directly explode into blood mist.

"Second Elder! Calm yourself!" The First Elder roared in response, releasing his aura to counteract and lessen the pressure on those in the surroundings.

"Calm?! Why should I be calm?! My lineage has been cut in a single instant, how can I be calm?!"

"I understand what you're feeling, but—"

"HOW COULD YOU UNDERSTAND?!" The Second Elder boomed. "Your son is still alive and well in there. You must be celebrating that nothing happened to him. Yet, you dare tell me to stay calm?!"

"Enough!" A third aura encapsulated both of the previous ones. It was so cold and murderous that it immediately stopped the quarrel between the two elders.

"Second Elder, you aren't the only one that lost something just now. Be sure to remember that." The man's voice was exceedingly cold. With words alone, he managed to lower the temperature to the point where even 4th class existences were shivering.

"Y-yes Clan Leader." The Second Elder bowed while gritting his teeth. He suddenly realized who else would've been grouped with his two children. The Clan Leader's fourth son frequently hung out with them, after all.

But the Clan Leader's next words made his blood run cold.

"That trash really sullied the name of my Xue Clan. It's good that he died before he could embarrass me further."

That's right. This was the kind of man Xue Yebai, Clan Head of the Xue Clan, was. Nothing mattered to him more than benefits. Even his own children were tools he could use to further his own power.

"How are Yue'er and little Feng? The ones they took with them should be fine too." Xue Yebai asked.

"Y-yes, Clan Head. It is as you say." An attendant responded fearfully.

Xue Yebai nodded indifferently. "As I thought, the useful ones won't be killed off so easily. However, I want to see who really dares to target our Xue Clan."

By the end of his words, his voice was booming. The deaths of those geniuses mattered not, but he would never allow the Xue Clan to lose face.

"C-clan Head, weren't our groups given a mission to eliminate the little princess? Perhaps..." someone suggested.

Xue Yebai glanced over icily. "That slut? Didn't you see the way she arrived? As I thought, her only use is to cling to the thighs of a man and bring our Xue Clan's standing up. How could a slut like her be powerful enough to take on our geniuses?"

"Y-yes. I shall not doubt the Clan Head's judgement." The man replied hastily.

Although he said it, Xue Yebai wasn't so sure about his words himself. Unlike these clueless elders, he knew the true reason why Xue Ruyue was treated like trash in the clan.

It was because her talent, it was so great that it far outstripped any genius the Xue Clan had produced in the thousands of years of its existence. If she was allowed to properly grow...

'The work my ancestors and I have put into bringing this matriarchal clan down and taking it for ourselves, I won't allow a single wench to ruin it.' Xue Yebai thought to himself.

'I should've gotten rid of her when I had the chance. If she didn't get accepted by that damn Tian Yang...! Whatever, what's done is done. The opportunity may not present itself now, but when it does, I will cease it without fail.'

Xue Yebai turned his attention back to the five remaining life tablets on the wall. Looking at the name of the woman named Xue Yue, he showed a mixed expression of both visible disgust and lust.

'That bitch...if she didn't take after her sister so much she'd be the perfect woman. I should put her in her place when we return to the clan.'

A malevolent grin spread on his face for a second before disappearing. He licked his lips as if he was thinking of the most delectable meal.

'I birthed you and raised you, I groomed you into a fine woman, so it shouldn't be too much to ask that you repay your father, is it?'

Seeing Xue Yebai's expression, the elders in the room shivered.

Although he didn't show it often, they knew how vile of a man he was. Even talking about his sexual preferences alone, he had no limits. His mother, sisters, daughters, none were off limits. In fact, he seemed to become more aroused when he was with someone he had blood ties with.

It was due to his insane fetish that the Xue Clan began practicing inbreeding. The whole matter about preserving their lineage was simply a front. Yet, only a select few were privy to this information, and those select few held undying loyalty towards the vicious Clan Head.

The Xue Clan elders sighed and returned to their previous posts, minding their own business until the secret realm closed.

Having a Clan Head like Xue Yebai was a gamble amongst gambles. With his raging ambition and twisted personality, either he would raise the Xue Clan to the peak, or he would cause it to fall within moments.

But it was too early to tell which outcome would come to fruition. The Xue Clan had been laying low for so many years, perhaps this secret realm was the first time they would show the strength of their younger generation.

Xue Feng and Xue Yue, the two heavenly geniuses of the Xue Clan and the hope they had for becoming more than they were now.

It was just...the personalities that those two had were odd to say the least.

Chapter 433 Sword [1]

Two people walked through a grassy plain in the Empyrean Dragon Realm.

"Come on~ why does this place have to be so far away?" The woman among them complained.

"Considering the size of the Empyrean Dragon Realm, the fact that we can even walk there means we were lucky to be dropped close by." The man beside her answered.

The duo looked almost identical to each other even though they had no direct blood ties. From their piercing blue eyes to the silvery white hair that decorated their heads. If it wasn't for the height and gender differences, nobody would've been able to tell them apart.

"Still, though! My legs hurt, so carry me!" The girl continued.

"You're heavy." The man replied blandly.

"Hey! Did your parents never teach you that you should never talk to a woman about her weight?"

"You're right. They didn't teach me."

"You're no fun~!" The girl pouted.

"You're just annoying."

However, the man's response wasn't any less plain than it was any other time she spoke to him. Considering how badly their personalities meshed, it was a strange sight to see the two together. But oddly enough, their conversations always carried an unknown synchronicity that made it difficult for anyone to disrupt their flow.

"Hey~ aren't we supposed to be trying to kill big sister now? Why aren't we doing that?"

"Xue Yue, do you really want to kill that woman?"

"Why wouldn't I~? From the moment I was born, I was always trapped in her shadow. They didn't even try to hide it, naming me Xue Yue as if I wouldn't notice that it's only a single character difference from her name. It's annoying to have a shadow looming over you all the time that you can never get rid of, you know?"

Xue Feng looked over at her for the first time since they started moving.

"Your mouth speaks these words but it's never reflected in your eyes. It's the most terrifying thing about you."

"Hmm~?" Xue Yue tilted her head curiously as he spoke. But just as he said, her eyes were as indifferent as ever.

It was as if they were detached from the rest of her face, never matching the expressions she made, and forever unchanging.

"You know it wasn't my choice, right~? Still, isn't it fine? I like it better like this!"

Xue Feng turned back around and walked. He was no longer in the mood to converse with her.

'Xue Ruyue...that woman must be strong.'

If she was able to escape the pursuit of the Xue Clan and stay alive for so many years, there was no way she'd be a weak person. Xue Feng felt like immediately turning around and searching for her so they could duel.

But he held himself back. Considering the woman's personality listed in the records the Xue Clan gave them, she should be holding quite a grudge. Even if they didn't go to her, she'd go to them.

And if that was the case, there was no reason to pursue her. Instead, it would be better to gain the benefits of the secret realm instead of wasting time.

'Besides that, I don't know why I always end up traveling with this woman.'

He glanced sideways at Xue Yue. He could never figure out whether to trust her or be wary of her. And with how much they usually interacted, he felt a bit of both.

'Is she strong or not? She has always hidden herself behind those eyes. Maybe I should fight her?'

As if the Heavens were set on making her compete with her elder half-sister, they made her almost a carbon copy of the latter. Even the points that the Xue Clan didn't know about were the same.

Just as Xue Ruyue was born with a set of special pupils, Xue Yue was as well. Even the functions of their pupils were similar.

The only thing she didn't gain was Xue Ruyue's insane talent towards yin. Although she was talented in her own right, it wasn't to a level that would make the Xue Clan obsessed with her.

Nonetheless, her pupils alone were enough to put her amongst the top geniuses of the Xue Clan. With her unknown level of strength as well, nobody knew where she truly ranked. However, all but one were too wary of her to speak.

'What a good guy...I wonder how long it'll take to make him mine? Xue Yue thought inwardly.

If there was one thing she inherited from the Xue Clan, it was her extreme mental illness. Ever since she had met Xue Feng when they were little, she had been unhealthily obsessed with him.

'But this bastard only ever thinks about getting stronger. No matter how much I try to seduce him, it never works. He doesn't even listen to the elders' orders unless it's an order that will increase his strength. How did he even become like this?'

It was quite funny. Although they were so different, they were brought together by the fact that neither of them really cared for the hierarchy of the Xue Clan. They were the two most rebellious geniuses the clan had produced, if one didn't count Ruyue.

The pair continued their walk to the location that was marked on their map. There, something that was more than worthy enough to take Xue Feng's attention off of battle with Xue Ruyue was resting.

'The Empyrean Dragon Sword, the Ancient Sect's crowning artifact. I heard a rumor that it might be a Demigod-ranked artifact.' Xue Feng thought.

His hands itched as he thought about it. He wasn't a naturally greedy person, but he was a believer that treasures go to the strong. The location of the Empyrean Dragon sword would then have a double benefit for him.

Firstly, he would get the opportunity to duel with the most talented young prodigies of the major clans. These were the kinds of people who could know the location of such a place. As for rogue cultivators, the ones who could actually make it to the location itself were all worthy to enter his eyes.

Secondly, was the Empyrean Dragon Sword itself. He didn't lust after the borrowed power of an artifact, he wanted to climb from the bottom with his own strength. However, to Xue Feng, reaching the peak of 4th class or even the Demigod Level was a given.

He believed in his talent and determination.

And when that day came when he reached a point where Chaos-ranked artifacts were as common as drifting clouds, when he needed an artifact that could truly hold his strength, the Empyrean Dragon Sword was a perfect choice.

'I wonder if there is anyone who can truly match up to me? Or maybe it'll be just as boring as before. However, if that man is here...'

Xue Feng thought back to a scene he had witnessed not long ago. Of a single man crushing Wang Tianhe and Wang Chen, and then borrowing the Jade Heavenly Palace's knife to exterminate the Wang Family entirely.

He had never seen a genius like that before. All the noble ladies and young masters he had been forced to befriend were nothing compared to him. Xue Feng's hands itched even more. If he could beat that man, he would truly be worthy of the title of number one genius on the Cloud Plane.

However, when he arrived he didn't see a single trace of that man. Instead, there was someone else he had always wanted to meet.

'Aha, it looks like this time will be fun after all.'

Chapter 434 Sword [2]

A man stood before an ancient stele decorating the otherwise empty grassy plain. His hair was long and black, tied up into a high ponytail. His eyes were equally black, having a sort of unknown attraction that sucked one's soul.

A large sword decorated his side as he walked. Even though keeping weapons in spatial rings or artifacts was common, and sometimes made it far easier to draw them in battle, the man didn't believe in this custom at all.

'A sword cultivator should never be apart from his sword.'

If his sword wasn't by his side, then he failed as a Swordmaster. Even if the world acknowledged him as such, he would no longer have the right to possess such status.

'Never mind that, it seems that all parties are slowly gathering. If this stele didn't need 40 people to gather before opening, I'd have already rushed in.'

He thought of the ancient sword that was said to be slumbering below this stele. He almost began drooling as he pictured its body.

"Brother Chen!"

However, an endearing voice pulled him out of his thoughts, saving his dignity. Seeing who called out to him, he smiled gently.

"Ling'er! Did you find what you were looking for?" His tone was completely unlike what he showed to others. Compared to the indifference he used towards outsiders, his treatment of this Ling'er character was like heaven and earth.

It was to the point where some of the women in the crowd immediately went green with envy when they saw his smile.

"Mm, I couldn't find them. I thought they'd come, but I guess they have something more important to do." Ling'er pouted.

Long Chen smiled gently and patted her head. "Relax. I don't think they would forget about you that easily. Didn't you save their lives back then? Perhaps, they are just a bit busy at the moment."

Ling'er's pout deepened. "What could be more important than the Empyrean Dragon Sword?"

Long Chen smirked. "Ling'er, what's more important to you: me, or the Empyrean Dragon Sword?"

Ling'er furrowed her brows. "Of course, it's you. But why did you...don't tell me...!"

Long Chen nodded with a grin. "Yeah, that guy I told you about is finally back. There's no way they'd choose some random sword over their husband, right?"

Ling'er nodded in agreement, some of her disappointment clearing up. Seeing that she was appeased, Long Chen finally looked away.

'Including those from the Long Clan, three major clans have sent their geniuses. And I assume the Xue Clan's geniuses will arrive soon. As for the sects...'

His gaze turned in a specific direction. There, a handsome man with cool blue hair stood with a half-smile on his face.

'Hao Lingtian.'

One of the top geniuses of the Jade Heavenly Palace's younger generation. However, he was the only one representing them. But it wasn't like Long Chen was any different. Of the Celestial Star Palace, only he was sent to this important location.

'Hmm, he will be a difficult enemy. I'm not sure yet whether or not I can beat him, but it should be a close battle.'

As he thought, he suddenly felt a burning gaze directed at him. His head turned instantly and matched it.

'Xue Feng.'

Long Chen's indifferent face twisted into a wild grin. After all, the man who was looking down at him from above also had a sword strapped to his hip.

Boom!

Two auras flared, one bright golden and the other icy blue. Even though the distance between them was substantial, it almost felt like they were standing right next to each other.

Clang!

A sound as if metal was clashing against metal. In the midline where their eyes met, an invisible clash had taken place.

'Sword Aura!'

Both of them realized at the same time. Their raging battle intent seemed to become far fiercer.

Sword Qi, the energy unlocked when one was still leveling their Sword Mastery skill to the max, was actually only the basic level a sword cultivator would reach.

If they couldn't even unlock Sword Qi, it was better if they just put down the sword and never picked it up again. Doing so would be a disgrace to the weapon.

The level after Sword Qi was Sword Intent. This was the level Damien reached, and one that would qualify someone as a beginner in the path of the sword.

However, the difficulty of graduating from Sword Intent and achieving Sword Aura was insane. It wasn't a level that any common practitioner would be able to reach within their lifetimes.

But for swordsmen, it was a level that signified their ascent to being a true swordmaster, one who diligently pursues the path of the sword.

Since Damien only used a sword for the sake of convenience and survival, since he was never truly dedicated to his sword, he could never achieve Sword Aura. He would never even make progress in Sword Intent with that mentality.

But his path was different from swordsmen. In fact, having to create one's own Sword Art to evolve the skill was already a divergent path. Creating a Sword Art was supposed to be a far more grueling and sacred process, where a swordsman put everything he had ever comprehended into his sword to create a style.

But this didn't matter. The fact of the matter was, the two men who were currently clashing with their gazes walked the path of true swordmasters.

"Brother Chen!"

Ling'er's call woke him up from his battle-ready state. Xue Yue did the same for Xue Feng. The two men retracted their auras, but didn't stop their staring contest.

Then, they both nodded simultaneously.

'We shall meet again at the end.'

They both acknowledged the message. Among the geniuses here, the two of them would be the final contenders for the sword. Only then would they have the fight they were yearning for.

"It seems that everyone has arrived." Long Chen looked around once more, ignoring how many people were avoiding his gaze. Once he counted that the necessary number of people had gathered, he turned to the ancient stele.

"We must jointly pour our mana into this until it opens a path for us. If you don't wish to enter that place, do not step up to the stele." He announced.

Without waiting for any responses, he walked up to the stele and did as he said. And after he did so, many others began to follow his lead.

Voom!

The ancient stele pulsed with power, sending off waves of mana as if to declare its location to everyone in the realm. As more and more mana was poured into its body, it began shining with a stellar blue light.

Whoosh!

A heavy wind raced through the atmosphere, but by the time it arrived at the stele, all those geniuses who had been pouring their mana into it had disappeared.

"Dammit! Too late!" The wind lamented. Within seconds, it coagulated in one place, turning green with the light of mana and then forming the outline of a woman.

"What a shame! With so many top geniuses gathered, there would've been so much loot left behind! Haa, whatever. I guess I need to go find another golden goose."

The woman's figure disappeared once more, merging with the wind and flying away soundlessly.

Chapter 435 World [1]

It was now the fourth day since the secret realm opened.

A fierce battle was taking place under the ancient stele where the Empyrean Dragon Sword was located. Dozens of practitioners were dying in their pursuit of treasure, while others were moving forward with vigor.

In another location, the remaining geniuses of the Xue Clan were being put through unearthly torture at the hands of their abandoned princess.

Overall, the entire secret realm was enveloped in an air of competition and battle. Even if there were no inherent dangers of the secret realm itself, the most dangerous factor in these kinds of situations would always be humans.

However, there was one secluded area of the secret realm, far closer to the central area than any others, where this competitive atmosphere didn't translate.

A man sat quietly with his back against a tree. With his hands behind his head, a weed in his mouth, and eyes closed, he was the picture of tranquility as he basked in the current atmosphere.

On his lap, a woman rested with an equally peaceful expression. Her legs extended into the grass, her toes curling and playing with the small follicles of grass between them.

"Shouldn't we be doing something right now?" Damien asked. They only had a week in this secret realm, yet they spent over half of it partaking in a...different kind of battle.

"Don't want to," Elena replied grumpily. She snuggled up closer to Damien, refusing to let him get up.

"We'll have to go at some point. You know I have things to do while we're here, and don't you have to go earn some treasures as well? It'd be no good if you left this place empty-handed."

"Whether or not I gain treasures doesn't matter to me. All the treasures I have right now were gifted to me by you, so I don't want to replace them."

"What?" Damien's eyes widened. "You're telling me those bastards at the Supreme Fairy Paradise didn't give you a new sword or any protective artifacts? It looks like I have another lesson to teach when we get out."

Elena smiled wryly. "It's not like they didn't try to give me new equipment, I just didn't accept. This sword was personally forged for me because of your thoughtfulness, so how could I let it go so easily?"

Damien looked down at the woman in his arms. He really didn't know what to do with her. To him, sentimental value wasn't as important. He had lost that kind of thinking when he was forced to discard everything back in the dungeon.

'Or maybe I didn't...' Damien smiled inwardly as he glanced into his subspace. There, he saw an old and rusty shortsword. It was so worn down that it looked as if a single gust of wind could destroy it entirely, but it was somehow holding on with all its might.

'Your sister sword was destroyed to protect me all the way back then, but you managed to stay in one piece through all the trials and tribulations we went through in the dungeon. Now that I think about it, it'd be less surprising if you had broken when I first created the Void Sword Art.'

He shook his head and cleared his mind. He was just thinking about how he had lost his sense of sentimentality, yet he had fallen into such a trance right afterward. It was a good thing he didn't say anything out loud, or he would've been too embarrassed to face anyone.

"If the reason you didn't change your sword is because it's a gift from me, then I just have to gift you a better one, right? Using equipment below your level is dangerous. I can't allow you to keep doing something like that."

"Mm, let's do that then." Elena smiled gently. How long had she been waiting for the day they could be like this? Finally achieving her wish, she wanted to jump with joy.

'I should thank big sister for this. If it wasn't for her constant pushing, I probably would've run away without saying anything.'

Suddenly, her heart sank. She remembered what she had to do, the ambition that was clashing with her desire to stay with Damien and Rose.

But she cleared her mind instantly. Now wasn't the time to think about depressing things. She should just enjoy the moment while she still could.

The couple stayed stationary for many hours. At one point, they even fell asleep and took a short nap under the shade of the tree. Their current atmosphere seemed to wash away all their fatigue.

However, being sedentary didn't suit them. Even if they wanted to enjoy the moment, it was better to do so after they had completed their individual tasks.

Damien sighed as he stood up, picking Elena up in the same motion. "Alright, I guess it's time for me to take care of urgent matters. And since I have to go to the most central point of the sect to do so, you should also be able to find some good stuff by coming with me."

Elena rolled her eyes. "Okay then, Prince Charming. Take me away to this magical land you speak of."

"As you wish," Damien replied with a grin. The two of them flashed away, reappearing in a new location.

'This teleport formation is really useful. Since I connected with it when we first entered the secret realm, I don't even have to expend my own mana to teleport. Plus, I can move much farther and more precisely with less concentration.'

The location they were at was the very center of the sect that Damien was speaking of just moments prior. Unexpectedly, they had reached their final destination in a single leap.

"Wow, this is too unfair." Elena gasped as she looked around.

It felt like they had just skipped over all the important stuff and reached the end goal with no hard work at all. It almost felt like they didn't even have the right to be in this central tower.

Damien shrugged. "It's within my ability to do this, so whoever designed this place should have no complaints. It's their fault they didn't anticipate a spatial practitioner to arrive here."

"No, I'm pretty sure other spatial practitioners wouldn't be able to arrive here so easily. I refuse to believe there were no countermeasures for such an obvious flaw."

"Maybe so, I guess I'm just a genius like that," Damien responded with a cheeky grin.

Elena rolled her eyes and continued examining the surroundings.

The room they were in was like a massive spiraling tower. The walls were ornate and lined with draconian patterns etched into an unknown material, shelves filled to the brim with countless books lined the undecorated areas of the walls, all the way to the top of the tower that seemed around ten stories high.

As for the central area of the tower, it was completely empty.

"I don't think I should waste any more time. I have no idea how difficult it'll be to connect and establish communication with the World Core, so I'll get started right away. In the meantime, why don't you look around at these records? Perhaps they'll prove useful to you."

Elena nodded in agreement. The records of an Ancient Sect were nothing to scoff at, no matter how much Damien looked down on them. Finding insight from such records wasn't impossible at all.

In fact, Elena was sure it'd work out that way. As Damien made his way to the center of the structure, Elena parted ways and dive headfirst into the books on the nearest bookshelf.

Seeing her excitement, he couldn't stop himself from smiling. 'Ah, it seems I've been smiling a whole lot in the past few days.'

But that thought only made his smile grow wider. Moments of happiness like this were the reason he was hellbent on driving the Nox away from their universe.

'Well then, shall we get started?'

He closed his eyes and sat down in a meditative posture. His figure was in the direct center of the ornate diagram that colored the floor of the central tower. His mind was cleared of all extraneous thoughts, and when he finally judged himself to be ready...

'Celestial Authority.'

Chapter 436 World [2]

The formless starlight that marked Damien's class as a Celestial spread from his body. As it did so, his awareness pierced through the ground under him and dove as deep as it could go.

Or at least, that was what was supposed to happen.

When his awareness impacted the ground, it suddenly rampaged out of his control. His senses were forced to spread along the profound patterns on the floor beneath him.

'What is...'

Before he could question what was happening, an ancient and desolate aura began to emanate from the formation, mingling with his Celestial Aura as if they were close pals.

No matter how much Damien tried to break out of his meditation state and stop the ongoing process, it wouldn't work.

But just as soon as he started struggling, he stopped altogether. He allowed his awareness and aura to flow as they pleased.

It was because he could sense something in his spiritual world. It wasn't an intruder, nor was it something special at all. It was far more profound than anything like that.

As the ancient aura covered his body and merged with his own aura, its formless essence rushed into his body. The Void Physique immediately went to work to counter it.

But Damien still didn't move. Instead, he spoke out with his mind's voice. It wasn't a vocal or mental projection using mana, he was simply thinking as if he was speaking to someone else.

'I know you're here. How long do you plan to observe me before making contact?'

He was met with silence. The presence he was speaking to didn't act, nor did it reveal its location. But he knew it was there somewhere.

'We have urgent matters to talk about. I'm not sure what you're planning to do with this formation, but I'm sure it isn't trying to harm me. If you're doing something like this, then you should be open to negotiation, right?'

Another silence.

Damien didn't fret. He knew from the beginning that this being wasn't something he could just carelessly make contact with. And he knew that actually hearing its voice was something that very few, if any, were given the right to do.

And so, he continued his prodding for what felt like hours on end.

'With the way times are changing, you will not be safe from the coming catastrophe. Considering your status, you should already understand this much. Partnering with me is your best chance at survival, and perhaps something far greater than just that.'

Damien finally felt a response. Although it wasn't vocal, he could feel thoughts of intrigue filling his spiritual world.

'This is just how that little one communicated, but considering your age, you shouldn't be limited to just this. I understand that you might have a great deal of pride, but don't let pride be the reason you forfeit your life.'

[The concept of pride is not something that applies to us.]

Damien smiled inwardly. Finally, he had provoked a response.

'And why is that?' He questioned on.

[This thing called pride was invented by the living. It is something solely possessed by those with will. However, we are not beings with will.]

'If you were not beings with will, then you wouldn't be communicating with me right now, would you?'

[...]

[Human reasoning is strange. We make contact with you not because of our will, but for our survival.]

'I'm honored that you think I can play a part in that.'

[It is a logical judgement based on the actions you have shown since your arrival.]

'Logical, huh. The logical choice would probably be to latch onto someone far more powerful and accomplished than me. Why would you choose me then?'

[Others do not possess your ability.]

Damien flinched. Right, even communicating like this wasn't something the latter could do with just anyone. Most likely, this being hadn't spoken to a human in eons.

[State your proposal.]

The voice was cold and detached. It almost didn't sound like a single voice at all. It was like the amalgamation of the voices of everything that lived and breathed. Genderless and formless, being defined only by its own standards.

'I want to bind you. My duty as a Celestial is to do so. It is to my own benefit, and also yours if you allow me to proceed.'

[How will we benefit?]

'Simple. As I stated before, your survival is hinged on the lives of those living within you, as well as the status of the Core that allowed you to attain consciousness. If either of these is greatly threatened, you will also be in danger.'

Damien wasn't sure if his words were truth. It was mere conjecture he made about worlds through his own experience with them, as well as his insights on Dimensional Magic. However, it didn't seem like his conjecture was too far-fetched.

[Your words are not the truth, yet, they are equally truthful. The overarching purpose of your words, however, is without falsity.]

'Then there's no need to talk in circles. I believe that by granting me your power, you shall see benefits as well. Even disregarding the survival aspect, I believe that through our connection, I can stimulate your growth.'

It was a bold proposition. To stimulate the growth of an entire world, what kind of person could dare say they could accomplish it with confidence? Yet, Damien was sure he could do it.

'There is a precedent.' Damien continued before the World Core could speak. 'I don't know how much you can see from me, but I have already formed a connection with another world. That world is my home world, and through our connection, I can sense the changes taking place there.'

It hadn't even been 5 years since those elders from the Burning Sun Sect had drained earth of all its mana, yet, the world was growing at a rate where that lost mana had already been regained and even exceeded.

He couldn't feel it before because he hadn't formed his spiritual world yet. His connection was still too vague for him to directly interact with it. Even within the Primordial Undying Realm, he wasn't able to feel the changes due to being disconnected from the outside world.

But once he was given time to relax and consolidate his gains from that trip, he finally felt the drastic changes Earth was going through.

It was still vague. It wasn't like he could feel the presence of every person on Earth, or see what was happening on the planet. But he could intuitively feel the changes.

Whether it be the insane topographical changes of the world, the vast amount of mana that Earth possessed, which might've even been on par with Apeiron already, or the general strength level of the population, which had grown so explosively that Damien almost couldn't believe it.

Earth was no longer the same planet that Damien once knew. It was no longer a tiny world that would be fazed by a small number of 3rd class invaders.

He couldn't attribute this change to himself alone, he wasn't conceited enough to think he had so much sway, but he knew one thing for certain.

Earth's fate had changed when he bound it to himself.

The World Core read his thoughts clearly. He didn't have to speak directly for it to do so, as they were in a state where their consciousnesses were connected.

[...]

[That child called Earth can be called a precedent. But that child has not gained the qualifications to be compared to us. In relativity, our growth will be far more arduous.]

Damien grinned inwardly. Even though the World Core said it was indifferent to human emotions, he didn't think that was entirely the case.

There were two things that every entity would crave, regardless of their nature.

The first was survival.

As for the second, it was strength.

And right now, Damien was offering both to the World Core.

Chapter 437 World [3]

The World Core was silent for many minutes after Damien finished his proposal. Although there was plenty more he could say, and plenty more that needed to be said, he was only trying to arouse the World Core's interest, so those things could be saved for another time.

[We cannot accept this proposal.]

However, the World Core's response wasn't something he expected at all. Even with its survival on the line, it could still refuse?

'Wait, that's not right. Even its demise isn't guaranteed, and my being able to guarantee its survival also isn't something that it can completely trust with just my words. If I want to bind this World Core, it seems I'll have to wait and make more contributions to prove myself first. Otherwise—'

His thoughts were interrupted by the World Core's voice.

[Damien Void has sufficiently proven his qualifications in the location known as the 3000 Beast Mountain Range. Our reason for refusal is unrelated.]

Damien furrowed his brows. 'Unrelated? Is it some kind of unavoidable circumstance?'

[Affirmative. Our situation does not allow for us to contract with you.]

Damien's thoughts became complicated. A World Core was an enigmatic existence that he wasn't even close to fully understanding. But to him, they were like miniaturized versions of the Universal Will, which was also called the Heavens by many.

An unbiased entity that observes without interfering, yet possesses the power to exterminate everything if it truly decided to interfere.

Of course, having this kind of power limited their intelligence. The Universal Will didn't even have an ego of its own, while the egos present in World Cores were extremely incomplete when compared to a truly intelligent being like a human or a 4th class beast.

But regardless of their limited sentience, they were still existences that couldn't be trifled with. Let alone having circumstances, a World Core having personal problems unrelated to survival seemed nigh impossible.

'Wait, survival? Could it be...?'

Damien projected his thoughts. 'Can you show me your main body?'

[...]

[Affirmative.]

With the World Core's agreement, Damien's consciousness was untethered from the formation, traveling deep into the earth below until he reached a spacious cave like the one he had seen on Earth.

'My awareness can't spread this far with my own strength. The World Core must've guided me.' Damien thought. But soon enough, he was forced to stop thinking about useless things.

'This...!'

A shimmering stellar blue mass of energy similar to Earth's World Core stood before him. However, it was far larger than its younger counterpart. The mystical scene never ceased to mesmerize him even if he had seen it before.

But, being mesmerized wasn't something he was allowed to do at the moment.

Because an infinitely small portion of that World Core, an area close to 100 meters in diameter, was completely drenched in an inky black color.

'Nox mana.'

[Affirmative. This mana originates from the foreign species termed as the Nox. It has been corrupting our energy center for approximately 8,000 years.]

'Invading your energy center? What are the consequences?'

[With the current corruption percentage, we are unable to differentiate between foreign invaders and indigenous species. The foreign mana also allows the invading species more freedom in relation to controlling the world's forces.]

Damien frowned. He didn't know much about what the latter sentence meant, but even though it didn't seem like much, it was a great feat to fool a World Core into thinking that invaders were true inhabitants.

Although World Cores couldn't interfere in what happened in their worlds, they could introduce restrictions and other indirect measures to inhabit those that were unwelcome.

p For instance, blocking access into a forbidden zone like the 3000 Beast Mountain Range would've been possible if the World Core was aware of the Nox's presence.

It could've also given Alaric an indirect blessing that would've allowed him to overcome the Nox Demigod without dying, which would've been infinitely beneficial for not only the Cloud Plane, but the universe as a whole.

These were just smaller examples, since Damien didn't know the exact kind of authority an unbound World Core held, but even these examples were enough to make him understand the depths of the problem.

Luckily, a World Core wasn't a construct that could be easily corrupted. Even after thousands of years, they could only do so much damage.

[If a contract is created at the moment, the foreign mana might lead to unknown consequences. This risk will not be taken.]

Damien shook his head. The prospect of corrupting a World Core was what worried him. As for the corruption itself, he didn't think much of it.

'This isn't a problem I can't solve. Allow my physical body to appear here, and I can take care of this for you. All you have to do is promise to contract with me afterward.'

[...]

[Understood. If Damien Void possesses the ability to reverse corruption, we shall consent to forming the contract.]

Damien nodded. At least this was going as he expected. Even if the World Core didn't know much about his power, he knew it should at least have an inkling about what the Void Physique was capable of.

It was an entity that could otherwise be called the soul of the world, after all. It definitely had the capability to review what he had been doing ever since he arrived here.

Soon after the World Core gave its acknowledgment, Damien felt the ambient mana around him churn and convert into spatial mana. At the same time, it wrapped around his body, transporting him away.

When he reappeared, he was back in the location he was just viewing with his awareness.

"Alright. There's no need to delay with useless talk anymore since we've already made a deal. I'll get to work immediately."

Damien's figure appeared in front of the corrupted area. When compared to his size, it dwarfed him by many times. But still, at the end of the day, it was just mana.

Compared to the profound and unattainable mana that the World Core itself was made out of, this Nox mana was something he could fathom with relative ease.

He had devoured enough Nox for it to be like that.

He put his hand into the cloud of incorporeal mana and activated his Void Physique.

'Devour.'

He had never used Devour this way, but it was a perfect application of the ability. The Void Physique excelled at cleansing foreign substances.

'Phew. If it wasn't for the World Core helping me, I wouldn't even be able to stand here without turning into ash.'

Damien leisurely thought to himself as he devoured the foreign mana within the World Core.

This massive construct wasn't something a 3rd class like him should be able to stand in front of. Even with his class as a Celestial, doing so without sufficient power was suicide.

The mana that made up World Cores was completely different than the mana that living beings used. Even in comparison to the Divine Power used by Divinities, it was a different breed.

It was another reason why Damien felt that World Cores were the closest beings to the Universal Will that existed.

But none of that mattered at the moment. Damien closed his eyes and relaxed as more and more Nox mana entered his body through devour, only to be purified by his Void Physique an instant later.

This process, it might take far longer than he was originally expecting it to.

Chapter 438 World [4]

The fifth day soon dawned on the secret realm. Within the central area, Elena was currently immersed in the myriad of books lining the walls.

Since Damien had told her about his circumstances before suddenly disappearing, she didn't waste any time worrying about him. As things stood, it looked like he was going to get stronger once again through whatever he was doing.

'But it's not like I'm not the same.' She thought as she closed the book in her hands.

This library was truly something else. Rather than calling it a library, it was more apt to say that this was the main record storage of the Empyrean Dragon Sect.

Whether it be history books, cultivation manuals and martial skills, or even records of the Great War, they were all present within this library.

'Haa...it's a shame. Half of these books are written in the ancient language of the Cloud Plane instead of the universal language. It's a shame that the system doesn't give us an automatic translation skill, but I guess it can't be helped.'

Putting the entire universe under a single language to prevent language barriers was enough to maintain balance. The system wasn't obligated to do any more than that.

Actually, just the fact that a universal language was created and implemented was insane enough.

But Elena didn't mind the small details. She was simply lamenting over the fact that some of the most important books she found weren't written in a language she could read.

'Whatever, I'll just take what I can get. It's not like my gains here have been small.'

"Martial skills" was a term used by those on the Cloud Plane, but the concept of transferable skills wasn't something unique to them.

Skill books, skill cards, these kinds of constructs existed even on Earth. But the quality of skill that could be transferred didn't add up at all.

After all, transferable skills still had to first be created and trained by the one who created them. They also needed to have enough comprehension of the skill to streamline the process of learning it for others. Just describing the process of creating the skill wasn't enough to make it transferable.

As for the one learning the skill, they of course needed to put in effort to do so. Even a beginner-level skill needed to be trained before it was earned.

This was why transferable skills on Earth only amounted to useless skills like a Cooking skill or basic swordsmanship.

But here on the Cloud Plane, a world with countless years of experience that had produced an innumerable amount of powerhouses, things were different.

From defensive techniques, attack techniques, and even more enigmatic supportive techniques that Elena had never heard of, this library had them all.

'If I could loot this entire place, I definitely would, but these skills don't all match with me so it won't matter. My affinities are Light and Life, so I should prioritize skills related to those two elements.'

Elena skimmed through the skillbooks on the shelves. The main problem for her at the moment was that her fighting style heavily differed from others who had the same elemental affinities as her.

For one, most Life or Light element users chose the supportive path rather than the offensive one. Becoming a skilled healer or support was far more useful and made better use of their elemental properties.

But Elena was never one to stay on the back lines of a battle. Plus, with her advancement into 3rd class, her fighting style had gone through another drastic change.

Souls of Valhalla, her main skill as a Valkyrie, was a summoning skill. The more she used the skill and leveled it, the greater the number of warriors she could summon to fight for her.

It was as if the system was subtly judging her that fighting on the frontlines wasn't the role that suited her the best, even if being at the forefront of battle was still her role.

'I can summon around 20 of those warriors now. As for the skill itself, it seems to be connected to my Light element rather than Life, so I should prioritize that element for offensive purposes.'

As for Life element, she didn't actually have many skills or spells related to it. Other than the most standard healing skills, her main skill was Yggdrasil.

'Looks like I'm deeply connected to Norse mythology. I wonder why that is...'

Elena suddenly thought back to her past. The days before the World Awakening, even before she had met Damien in high school.

When she was a child no more than five years old, when both of her parents had died due to unknown causes.

She had been left in an orphanage that day. Even though she went from foster home to foster home for a while, that orphanage was her true home for many years.

As for her parents, she didn't even remember their faces.

But she never minded it. For her parents to have died so early in her life, she didn't feel much connection to them at all.

But after the world changed, she began to doubt some things.

'Damien's father is...quite obviously not someone from our world. The surname Void was enough to key me into that fact after the world changed, but with the kinds of things he's told me, apparently it's all but confirmed at this point.'

So if his father could be someone amazing, couldn't her parents be the same? This was the kind of nonsensical thinking that went through her head occasionally.

But she couldn't shake off the sensation that she might be right.

There were many clues. For one, her talent. Damien was an insane talent that couldn't be categorized like others. His growth being so rapid didn't affect her at all, it was only natural.

But Rose and Ruyue, these two women that had become her sisters, they had both begun their path to strength far before she had.

Not only that, but Rose was also at a far higher level than her when they first met.

But now, the two of them were relatively equal in power. Her growth wasn't something that logically made sense.

If she was a trueblooded Earthling, she should have talent that matched that of a beginner world, not one that matched the geniuses at the peak of a middle world.

Coupled with the mysterious calling she felt from a world only she could enter, it was hard for her to not doubt her origins. Thinking she was a simple character was just idiotic at this point.

'I don't know why I care so much about something like background. Even if my parents are still alive, it's not like they did anything good for me. Even if I have some profound and unimaginable background, as long as it doesn't interfere with my life, I don't care for it.'

Status came from power. Background was its own form of power, but it was one that she despised. Especially after interacting with so many incorrigible young masters and misses during the past year, she looked down on people who were unnecessarily prideful of their background.

Elena shook off her thoughts. 'Forget it, I shouldn't be thinking of these kinds of things right now. I need to take as many of these skillbooks and other useful books as I can before we get ejected from the secret realm.'

With her thoughts back in order, Elena returned to the task at hand.

However, perhaps her focus was why she didn't notice the flickering holographic emblem that appeared behind her as she did so.

Chapter 439 Sword [3]

The sixth day dawned on the secret realm, but those within hardly noticed.

In the central tower, Elena was immersed in studying the large number of texts present within. Every few minutes, she would enter the empty central area of the tower and practice the skills she had been learning.

Although she wasn't able to master them enough for them to show up on her status window quite yet, she was rapidly approaching that level. Perhaps, it would only take a few days or weeks after she left the secret realm to achieve mastery.

As for Damien, he was immersed in devouring the Nox mana plaguing the World Core. The previously massive stain of mana had been devoured at an extreme pace, reaching a size that wasn't much bigger than Damien himself.

And it wasn't just the two of them that were working hard.

Within the Empyrean Dragon Sword Inheritance, the fierce battles were finally coming to a close.

Dozens of geniuses had been killed, while others were evicted from the stele area. Those remaining within were only the best of the best.

Long Chen's wolf-like gaze scanned the room. 'Huo Lingtian, the Xue siblings, Ling'er, and that rogue cultivator. Besides the last fellow, everyone who came this far is as expected.'

There was something interesting that they had found while they were fighting for the right to inherit the Empyrean Dragon Sword. In fact, the inheritance residing in this area was a double inheritance, rather than just the sword itself.

Now that there were six people left, four more had to be eliminated before the inheritance could finally be claimed.

But even then, it wasn't so simple.

The previous layers of this inheritance site were filled with traps and puzzles, forcing them to use a variety of abilities to make their way through. Whether it be awareness, mana control, or stamina, their fundamentals were tested to the point of breaking.

Now, they had finally reached a stage where only battle could determine the winner. There was only a single problem remaining.

This inheritance site was widely known among the major powers, to the point where even rogue cultivators had heard rumors about it. Considering the many years that the Ancient Sect's realm had been open, along with the difficulty of the trials, it was impossible for nobody to have arrived at this juncture before them.

The reason why the Empyrean Dragon Sword was still laying dormant in this realm was simple.

As a rumored Demigod-ranked sword, it wouldn't live up to its reputation if it wasn't picky about its owner.

The final trial of this inheritance site wasn't to come out victorious in the trial by combat, it was to gain the acceptance of the sword.

Long Chen shook his head and turned his attention toward one person.

"Brother Xue, isn't it about time for us to cross swords?"

Xue Feng looked at him placidly. However, his tight grip on his sword handle betrayed his otherwise stoic demeanor.

"Brother Long, I would be honored to exchange pointers with you."

The two of them separated from the rest. As for the others, they didn't interfere with the battle. After all, even if they wanted to, the secret realm wouldn't allow them. An exchange between sword cultivators was sacred.

Huo Lingtian glanced sideways at the two. 'These two from the lowly great families are actually ignoring my presence. Master has told me countless times to rid myself of arrogance, but I don't think he would fault me for getting irked when I lose face like this.'

He didn't know how to properly enunciate how he was feeling. It wasn't a boiling rage or a desire to kill like he usually had when someone slapped him in the face, rather, he felt disappointment.

But it couldn't be helped. The two men he considered his rivals had ignored him and gone straight to fighting each other. He wasn't pleased with the way they treated him.

In the end, Huo Lingtian sighed. 'Sword cultivators are sword cultivators to the end. The wills of others don't matter in front of that of the blade.'

After shaking his head once more, he turned his attention to the remaining three in the room.

"Forgive me, but I am not a man who can act crassly in front of a lady, even if she is taken by another man. You two can fight each other, I will play with this gentleman over here."

He walked in front of the rogue cultivator and cupped his fist. "I am called Huo Lingtian of the Jade Heavenly Palace."

"Dong Hai, no affiliation." The voice that responded didn't match the man's body at all.

He was an average figure without too much or too little muscle. From his face down to his toes, everything about him screamed average. However, his gruff voice seemed like it would better belong to an abnormally muscled man with massive stature.

"Then, Brother Dong, shall we begin our match."

"If you want to fight, then let's fight. No need for all this sophistry."

Huo Lingtian's brow twitched. "As you wish."

While the two of them began their clash, Xue Yue and Su Ling'er arrived next to each other. They moved their hands at the same time, bringing items out of their spatial rings.

Unexpectedly, though, these items were elegant chairs for them to sit on. Soon after, an assortment of snacks and tea decorated a table that also appeared out of nowhere.

"I'll bet 500 spirit stones on Brother Chen." Ling'er proclaimed haughtily.

"Oooh, we're betting? My Feng Feng will definitely win, though~"

"If that's what you think, then why don't you match my bet?"

"Okay! I bet 500 spirit stones as well that my cute and handsome big brother will beat up your husband!" Xue Yue said with a mischievous smile.

"H-he isn't my husband...yet..." Ling'er responded with a blush.

"Oho~?"

"Kuhum!" Xue Feng loudly cleared his throat as he tried to ignore the two women who were clearly talking loud enough so the two of them could hear.

In truth, hearing Xue Yue call him "Feng Feng" almost made him fall to the floor coughing blood, but he managed to hold himself back.

"Your sister is..." Long Chen started.

"Don't say it. Just pretend like it never happened." Xue Feng cut him off.

Long Chen gave him a sympathetic look. "I understand your pain, brother. Being handsome sure is tough."

"Tsk ts, tell me about it."

The two men sighed in unison before grinning wildly.

"Shall we get started then?"

"I couldn't ask for anything more!"

Their figures turned into streaks of light, meeting within seconds with their blades swinging.

Clang!

There was no mana infused in the clash of two blades, but the impact still caused the winds to rage. The grins on the two men's faces widened immensely.

'This is it!'

It was hard to find a true sword cultivator, even in a place like the Cloud Plane. Becoming a sword cultivator meant forsaking one's elemental affinity for the blade. Even if elemental properties could be reintroduced into fighting later, until they achieved the level of Sword Aura, or the greater Sword Will, they would have to completely forgo elemental training.

Due to this restriction, which many people considered a huge weakness, not many had the resolve to follow the path of the sword religiously.

So when two sword cultivators met each other, it was an event they'd make sure to prolong as much as possible.

Chapter 440 Sword [4]

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Two swords clashed fiercely over and over again. One was a massive longsword, and the other was a more slim saber variant.

Even though the duo was only using physical strength and sword techniques in their clash, the pressure of their battle still caused large cracks and gashes to form in the earth below them.

A formless yet sharp sword aura enveloped their battleground as if protecting the sanctity of their duel.

Long Chen swung his sword heavily, impacting Xue Feng's saber with all his strength. However, Xue Feng wasn't just sitting still. His saber slid along the longsword's blade, smoothly parrying it before moving to strike once more.

Long Chen twisted his body to narrowly avoid the blade. However, he had lost his momentum when Xue Feng parried his earlier strike. Instead of trying to make another sweeping attack, he turned his sword around and swiftly stabbed Xue Feng's solar plexus with the hilt of the sword.

"Keuk...! I didn't expect you to use such a dirty trick!"

"Hahaha! Even if it is the hilt, it is still part of my sword. Who said I couldn't attack with it?"

"That's why I wasn't insulting you, I was just admiring your craftiness!"

Xue Feng stomped on the ground and propelled himself forward. He let out a flurry of attacks, forcing Long Chen to go on the defensive.

His saber moved like a snake, wriggling its way into even the smallest opening Long Chen left. As the fight continued on, Long Chen was forced to find a way to correct the weaknesses that even he didn't know about before Xue Feng showed him.

But it wasn't like he was alone in this. Xue Feng was also benefitting immensely from this duel. Long Chen's attacks were honest, yet filled with unbridled power. Even though the sword paths were predictable, it didn't make them any easier to block.

And once in a while, Long Chen would completely abandon his honest sword and sneak in an attack that one would never expect from seeing his previous swordplay. It was this kind of craftiness in the midst of predictability that made him a tough opponent to face.

This kind of exchange had happened hundreds of times already in the past few minutes. Although the main attacker and defender changed rapidly, the fact of the matter was that neither of them could land a hit on the other.

Instead of fighting for the Empyrean Dragon Sword, it was better to say that these two were using each other to perfect their own swordsmanship. But neither of them would have it any other way.

Bang!

Another flurry of exchanges took place. Without them even realizing it, their swords had been coated in colored Sword Aura.

"Isn't it...about time we start...showing off...our sword arts?" Long Chen said between breaths. His mana rose to cover his body, ridding the sweat that was covering him.

"Haha...I don't think...you'll be able to keep standing...if we do that..." Xue Feng replied, equally short of breath.

Mana brought sustainability. Even if one's stamina ran dry, one could use mana to compensate or boost it to the next level. However, fighting with pure body and technique like the two of them had been doing was extremely tiring for them, especially when facing an opponent with an equal level of skill.

But they were sincerely enjoying their fight, so neither of them noticed at all. Instead, after their short break, they immediately took their stances again.

"Watch out for this one. Nine Dragons Soar Into The Heavens!" Long Chen's voice crescendoed into a shout. His sword, wrapped in golden aura, made a swift upward slash that wasn't necessarily aimed at anything.

Rumble! Boom!

The ground began to rumble and cave in. From within, nine golden dragons made of Sword Aura fiercely shot out and surrounded Xue Feng.

"As expected of the Long Clan. Even your sword technique mirrors dragons." Xue Feng smirked. He raised his saber into the air, creating a clean and slow cut that even a mortal could follow.

"Limitless Sword Strike."

The nine dragons around his body charged in without hesitation. Their jaws were opened wide, rows of horrendous teeth shining in the cave light as they tried to rip Xue Feng to shreds.

But Xue Feng's sword completed its movement before they could. As if they had been trapped in a gelatinous substance, the movement of those dragons slowed until it was almost halted.

The clean blue line of Sword Aura passed through the dragon bodies one by one, unhurried and unrestrained, as if it was taking a casual stroll in the park.

Long Chen's eyes widened as he witnessed it. "Amazing. To think that you imbued your Sword Aura with such a spectacular concept."

It wasn't empty praise. Long Chen could clearly sense the profound intent behind the slash, even though he couldn't completely understand it.

"Very well, I shall not restrain myself to the Golden Dragon Sword Arts of our Long Clan. Instead, I will show you what I've achieved through my personal insight into the sword."

Long Chen's figure turned into a flash of gold, rushing towards Xue Feng before his sword could finish slashing the nine dragons in the air.

Right as he appeared before his opponent, Long Chen disappeared, reappearing ten meters in the air above.

"This is a sword inspired by a man who almost pushed me to the brink of death, despite having trashy sword techniques himself. Therefore, I decided to call it the Void Sword."

Long Chen's arms turned into countless mirages as he swung them faster than the common eye could track. His sword formed an extremely intricate pattern in the air as he did so, but as the pattern became more profound, it also became smaller and smaller.

"Return the world to origin, Void Sword!"

The massive pattern coagulated and became a single paper-thin line of Sword Aura that covered Long Chen's Sword.

"Haa..." Long Chen took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Although this sword wasn't completed, it was the pinnacle of his ability at the moment.

"Release!"

His eyes shot open, his sword moved at a snail's pace, but reached the end of its swing in an instant.

Xue Feng's eyes widened in shock. A sudden sense of encroaching death overwhelmed him. The odd part was, he couldn't even see the sword that Long Chen had released.

His mind turned rapidly. In the face of guaranteed death, his thoughts moved at a pace counted in microseconds. And in that time, he steeled his resolve.

"Just as you have created something so magnificent on your own, as have I. Allow me to show you the sword I created when I was trapped in the deepest pits of desperation."

Xue Feng closed his eyes and ignored the incoming blade. He shut out all sensations except for the feeling of his sword in his hand.

Time seemed to come to a halt, color faded from the world. It was a grey world that only Xue Feng could see.

And in this state, he could finally see the sword Long Chen had released.

It was formless, soundless, a representation of nothingness that someone existed in the physical plane. Seeing it, Xue Feng sighed in admiration.

"We are both pursuing impossibilities with our swords. Therefore, you are the person I admire the most in this world. If even this final sword cannot slash you, I shall follow you as my big brother for the rest of my life."

Xue Feng's sword slashed diagonally from top to bottom. In that instant, the grey and motionless world was split in two.

Long Chen and Xue Feng, these two were the only ones remaining in the world. Only they could see the clash between swords that was taking place between them. Everything else had been frozen in time.

Except for a single pair of cold and emotionless striking blue pupils, who stared at the two of them without a hint of expression at all.