

# Void 631

Chapter 631 Azure Rain Star [3]

"Hold on!"

Damien's voice thundered through the room. He couldn't let the Seeking Lotus Palace Master continue leading the conversation like this. If so, he'd only eat continuous losses.

"You're a powerful person, no? You should've clearly heard my conversation with Sierra in the other room. I'm not here to find a wife, I just want to find a good sect for an acquaintance of mine to attend."

"But you passed the mountain trials." The Palace Master replied blandly.

"So?"

"The mountain trials aren't simple. Their strength varies completely depending on who steps through the gates. It was said that the Ancestor's lover only felt a light breeze on the mountain path. Meanwhile, anyone else had to face intense challenges. What about you? What did you face?"

"I—"

"He faced a few minor killing formations and a beguiling array, but he's already a 4th class, so these minor arrays couldn't do anything to him." Sierra cut Damien off before he could speak. She was obviously taking great pleasure in his misfortune.

"Mm, then it's just like the ancestor's lover. Those minor formations only activated for show. This mechanism was put in place so that nobody would question the ancestor's bias in creating the mountain trial. Since then, this setting has never been activated again. This means you are destined for our sect."

The Seeking Lotus Palace Master spoke with certainty. She wholeheartedly believed in the sect's teachings and history. In fact, she was quite bland in some sense.

While she was a wise and powerful sect master, she was also strictly adherent to the old rules. When it came to tradition, she didn't mess around. The reason the Seeking Lotus Palace was still an all-women sect was due to this quality of hers.

Damien rubbed his forehead in frustration. It really was difficult getting through to this woman. He'd more easily be able to convince a wall to talk back to him.

"Look, I don't want any wives right now. I have enough already. Whatever your tradition is, I won't participate in it."

"But you don't have a choice. If you don't follow our traditions, I'll be forced to execute you by sect law."

Damien rolled his eyes and sneered. "This woman...don't you know how to be flexible sometimes? Nobody will want to marry someone as stuck up as you."

"That's fine since I have no plans of marrying. The sect is the only importance in my life. So then, what is your choice? Follow tradition or die?"

Damien's eyes hardened. He really didn't have the ability to fight the Palace Master even when just considering their base strengths. If Damien's other suspicion was true...then even his chances of escape became nonexistent.

In this situation, choosing to surrender and pick a wife-in-name from the Seeking Lotus Palace seemed to be the best move, but Damien's personality didn't allow him to bend so easily, especially not to someone like the Palace Master.

A sudden idea popped into his head. "Fine. I'll follow your traditions. I've already picked which woman I want to marry too."

"Good. Tell me her name and I can bring her to you. Once you've introduced yourselves, I'll brief you on the Challenge Gate and you two can enter together." The Palace Master said plainly.

However, Sierra's eyes widened in shock. She'd spent some time conversing with Damien. If she thought about what she knew about him...

His next action proved her worries true. His arm raised parallel to the ground, his index finger outstretched. Sitting where he was pointing was none other than the Seeking Lotus Palace Master herself.

He spoke with a smug grin. "You. I choose you."

"I am not an option." She replied without a change of expression.

"Are you sure about that, though? From the story you told, it seems your Ancestor was an option for her lover after he passed the mountain trials. If you love tradition so much, shouldn't you be happily offering yourself up?"

The Seeking Lotus Palace Master frowned. She didn't want to admit it, but Damien's words were true. The sect master was indeed included in the candidates a man could choose.

However, there were strict conditions for that to occur. To be specific...the exact conditions Damien met.

He was the only one in the past several tens of thousands of years to activate the mountain trial's mock trial, and the second person in history to do so. This rare occurrence was precisely what qualified him to pick the sect master as his wife candidate.

In the old ancestor's words, the mountain trial judged destiny. The trial one received would align with that destiny.

Essentially, Damien was "destined" for her.

But she didn't want marriage. The only thing she ever cared about was the sect, and she knew that'd never change in the future.

Her eyes turned to Damien, expressionless.

"You are allowed to choose me if that is your wish." She said, surprising both Damien and Sierra.

"However, if you wish to marry me, then not only do you have to achieve a new record in the Challenge Gate, you must also defeat me after you exit!"

In the end, Damien seemed to be a talented young man. Aside from upholding the sect's traditions, she could also build a connection with this young genius through their agreement. However, it would only be on paper. As long as she lived, she'd never let him lay a hand on her. This was her reasoning as she made her decision.

Damien smiled and nodded his head without hesitation upon hearing her proposal. He never wanted to marry the palace master in the first place, he simply wanted to delay for time.

If the palace master was still insistent on the rules, then in the worst case, Damien could run away and find a different world suitable for Jiao Mei. However, the matter hadn't become so complicated yet.

The Seeking Lotus Palace Master was inflexible about tradition but extremely wise when it came to ruling her sect. As for Sierra, she was a cunning fox who could trick anyone into doing her bidding. These two combined created a terrifying head to the Phoenix known as the Seeking Lotus Palace.

Their combined leadership could be trusted in Damien's opinion. Even if he had some conflict with them, the sect would still be a good fit for Jiao Mei as long as their techniques were good enough.

But for Damien to even find out about their techniques, he needed to maintain contact with the Seeking Lotus Palace Master and Sierra. Therefore, buying himself time using the Palace Master herself as his prize was his best option at the moment.

Nevertheless, with Damien's agreement, their conversation about his strange circumstance had come to a conclusion. The Seeking Lotus Palace Master tapped on her test, creating a holographic projection in the air.

But just as she was about to start explaining the Challenge Gate to Damien, he stopped her.

The familiar scent on her body kept getting stronger and stronger with time. Now, it was almost overwhelming.

The universe was screaming at Damien, and he noticed it quite quickly. Without another choice, he opened his mouth and asked the Palace Master the question that had been plaguing his mind.

"You...are you a Celestial?"

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The Palace Master's expression shifted instantly. The room morphed and Sierra's figure vanished, leaving Damien and the Palace Master alone.

"Who are you?" She asked coldly. Slowly, trickling up from the ground below, powerful streams of World Force converged around her body and enhanced her aura.

Bang!

The furniture in the room turned to dust under her aura's pressure. And all that pressure rushed towards Damien, attempting to force him into submission.

But instead, it brought a smile to his face. "So I was right...no wonder you smell so familiar. I didn't think I'd ever meet another Celestial in my lifetime."

"Another...?" The Palace Master repeated.

Damien's hand moved casually. World Force converged into his connection with his bound worlds and emerged at his fingertips. When his World Force came into contact with the Palace Master's, a strange scene took place.

Bzzt!

The World Force popped in the air and almost manifested a physical presence. Damien could feel both attraction and repulsion between the two forces.

"You...you are also...!" The Palace Master gasped. Just like Damien, she was experiencing a great shock.

Classes weren't unique. It was actually extremely common for two people to share the same class even if they were born billions of kilometers apart. However, even within these classes, there were various branches one could explore. This was where individuality came into play.

For Celestials, or rather, for spatial experts, this commonality wasn't so common.

Spatial experts were already incredibly rare, and Celestials were especially rare amongst them. While both Damien and the Palace Master knew that there were other Celestial in the past and some existing in the present, neither expected their current meeting.

"How did you know?" The Palace Master finally managed to ask.

"How could I not? The scent coming off your body is overbearing!" He replied.

"...scent?" She questioned with a frown.

"Ah, not a bad scent. It's more like...the scent of starlight?" Damien said, unsure.



"But I can't sense or smell anything from you. Also, how can you use World Force if you aren't in your bound world? What kind of path are you walking?"

Hearing her question, enlightenment dawned on Damien. He began to understand why only he could sense the Palace Master's Celestial status:

While the Palace Master was more powerful than him as a practitioner, Damien was more powerful than her as a Celestial.

And since he was more powerful, he could naturally sense her aura just like how she could easily tell his level with a glance.

Even within classes, there were various branches. When it came to the Celestial class, these branches were limited.

Celestials were conquerors, but not all of them were the same.

First, there were those like Damien. To Damien, the worlds he bound were a part of his strength. In a hierarchal sense, he was the emperor and they were his subjects.

The activities on those worlds weren't things he tried to control. He let civilization develop as it naturally would and allowed the power struggles of the world to remain.

Because his relationship was with the world itself, not its inhabitants.

Of course, he'd always be partial to the Adelaire Empire or Celestial Star Palace above other forces, but he wouldn't needlessly aid them in petty worldly squabbles. That was their business, not his.

Damien's conquerer's nature was grand. He wanted the entirety of existence under his control from its very foundation.

The Seeking Lotus Palace Master was different.

Her relationship with the Azure Rain Star was more likely to be an equals contract of sorts.

Rather than the world being her power, she was the world's power; its chosen Apostle.

She ruled this world from the shadows and maintained its peace. She allowed order to flourish and civilization to progress without a hitch. In this way, she led Azure Rain Star to a higher boundary with every passing minute.

To the Palace Master, conquering the universe didn't mean anything. There were already billions and trillions of beings on the Azure Rain Star alone. Managing them all was taxing enough. How could she do the same with an entire universe?

Unlike Damien, she took a hands-on approach in ruling the world. If his guess was right, then the Azure Rain Star was the only world she'd ever bound.

It was natural for her to be weaker than him, who had thousands of stars under his command.

'Well, there goes my lucky chance. I can't go after a married woman if her husband is treating her right...I guess the only way to make this trip worthwhile is through the Challenge Gate.'

Damien put this thought aside as he conversed with the Palace Master, who ended up telling him to address her by her name, Leona.

As fellow Celestials, there was a broad range of topics for them to talk about. Especially since they were on diverging paths, their knowledge and experiences greatly differed.

For instance, Damien had a lot more knowledge about World Cores themselves. He'd interacted with thousands at this point and he'd even cleansed two of corrupting mana. When it came to their structure and purpose in the universe, Damien knew a great deal.

But Leona was far better at utilizing World Force than he was. She'd spent thousands of years as Azure Rain Star's guardian, and through that time she'd developed her own methods of utilizing and enhancing World Force to best suit her needs.

The two remained in conversation for three days and three nights, completely unaware of the passing of time. But eventually, their conversation had to come to an end.

"No matter how much I wish to continue learning from you, we don't have too much time. The Challenge Gate's trial takes a long time for some people, and there isn't much time left before it closes. Once you safely return from the Challenge Gate, we'll have plenty of time to talk."

Damien raised his brow questioningly.

"Ah..." Leona yelped after realizing the indication behind her words. As he watched her get flustered, he smiled mischievously. It was truly novel to see such an expression on her face.

But the words she spoke weren't wrong. Damien had to visit that Challenge Gate. If the rewards were even half as good as what he got from the Storm Heavens Mystic Realm...

Damien's smile widened into a grin. His awareness entered a small pocket dimension that only he could see.

This dimension wasn't part of the Sanctuary that he built. Rather, it was a compartment he found anchored to him after exiting the Storm Heavens Mystic Realm.

This was the dimension where any rewards given by the Dimensional Leaderboard would remain until Damien withdrew them. It, along with access to the Dimensional Leaderboard's system, was what he gained in the Mystic Realm.

And in that dimension was a certain item.

It was a small marble around the size of a quarter. Its surface was smooth like glass, but underneath that exterior were flashes of terrifying lightning. Silver, gold, black, and even variant lightning colors like purple and blue all flashed around the marble in unison as if raging at the fact that they were captive.

When Damien's gaze landed on it, a blue holographic panel appeared in his vision.

There, four words were clearly displayed:

[Storm Heavens Realm Seed]

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The marble-like Storm Heavens Realm Seed was actually an extraordinary item. It was something even Demigods might fight to obtain.

Realm Seeds were incredibly rare. In simple terms, they were smaller and less complete variants of Damien's Sanctuary.

The Sanctuary was a complete realm. Especially now that he'd incorporated a World Core into it, the Sanctuary was incredibly stable. Once it settled into its new form, Damien could begin adding entire worlds into it until he eventually created star clusters, galaxies, or even universes!

Realm Seeds were similar, but far less refined. Compared to the Sanctuary, a Realm Seed's laws weren't complete at all. They were fractured pieces, but pieces that had the potential to grow into a whole.

A Realm Seed, with enough time and care, could be nurtured into a dole world that one could control perfectly. It was an ultimate treasure, especially for Demigods who needed to feel the universe's foundational laws so intently.

The Storm Heavens Realm Seed was obviously a lightning realm. It would bear resemblance to the Mystic Realm Damien got it from.

Still, he hadn't found an environment where he could retrieve it and safely incorporate it into the Sanctuary. The second the Realm Seed exited its dimensional pocket, its existence would be sensed by those Demigods,

Though, Damien didn't expect the Challenge Gate's rewards to be as heaven-defying. Firstly, Challenge Gates and Mystic Realms were intrinsically different. A Challenge Gate only contained a single cohesive challenge, and was usually much easier to complete than a Mystic Realm. Naturally, its rewards would be less appealing.

However, Challenge Gates appeared far more often than Mystic Realms. If not for this, there would've been no balance between the two methods.

Even putting that aside, the Realm Seed was a supreme reward in the first place. Damien gaining it was the product of multiple factors. Firstly, his performance in the Mystic Realm. Secondly, his fight against Atticus and the Demonic Lightning Snake. Thirdly, his actions in swallowing the Black Demon Lightning Sea and opening a portal to the Dawn World. And finally, him shattering the Mystic Realm entirety and reaching 420th place on the Dimensional Leaderboard upon his debut.

In fact, while Damien wasn't aware of this, his name was already spreading through the upper echelons of the universe. The feat he accomplished was something many geniuses from their Holy Lands would fail to do even if they had 1,000 tries.

The only reason there wasn't a swarm of Demigods around Damien trying to recruit him was Atticus. After Atticus returned to the Fallen Star Holy Land, he told the Holy Master about Damien and the fact that he'd attend Death Emperor Star's academy.

And if Damien was already headed to Death Emperor Star, these influences no longer had the need to chase him. They'd eventually meet him during one of the several events that the academy held throughout the year.

Nevertheless, Atticus' quiet efforts allowed Damien to travel these past three months in peace. However, the unseen commotion his name caused was enough proof of the grandeur of his entrance.

The Challenge Gate he was headed to now wouldn't be the same,

According to Leona, this Challenge Gate wasn't a test of power at all. Instead, it was a test of reflex and mental abilities. This didn't just include intelligence, but also more ethereal concepts like spiritual intent.

Hearing this, Damien was incredibly confident. After overcoming the Primordial Undying Realm's trials and absorbing so many foreign memories, his spiritual world had been fortified to the utmost.

Currently, his body stood in the air above the vast ocean he crossed to arrive on the Mystic Continent. The Challenge Gate was located under these waters.

"The most difficult part of this challenge is finding and entering the gate. A teleportation array has already been set up, so exiting is easy." Leona said, hovering next to Damien. She had decided to personally escort him to the gate and watch his progress. He was a potential future husband for her, so naturally, she had to evaluate him with her own eyes.

"We can't enter through the same teleportation array?"

"No. You can't enter the Challenge Gate unless you pass through the physical gateway entrance that manifests. That's where they got their name from. There aren't any rules about exiting, though, since the trial is already over at that point."

Damien nodded. It wasn't unreasonable for the Challenge Gate to be structured in such a manner.

"The Challenge Gate will determine the difficulty and contents of your trial after you pass through the entrance. The only thing I can tell you is that the theme will be what we discussed before. Remember, no treasure is worth more than your life. I don't wish to see the first foreign Celestial I met die young."

Damien smiled at Leona's encouragement and rushed into the sea below. Over these past few days, he came to realize that she wasn't as stuck up as he originally thought she was.

Leona wasn't just protecting her sect, she was protecting the entire world.



The Seeking Lotus Palace's Founding Ancestor was a Celestial, and she formed the sect for the sole purpose of drawing attention away from this identity of hers. Over time, the sect grew into its own entity and her legacy as the Star Master was forgotten. That is, until Leona came along.

There were many rules and traditions in place that protected Leona and hid her Star Master status. These were precautions built by the Founding Ancestor. However, just sticking to these few rules would be far too obvious to anyone with a keen eye.

Instead, Leona decided to follow tradition to the letter. This way, nothing she did was ever questioned. Even Damien was fooled by her stubbornness until he identified her scent.

In truth, Leona had been protecting Azure Rain Star from the shadows for a very long time. There were even stories about mysterious heroes etched into the world's history that were actually written about her.

When this was taken into context, Damien couldn't help but sympathize. She was truly a wise and benevolent ruler.

At the same time, he felt lucky to step onto the Conquerer's Path instead of the World Lord's path. He didn't believe he could stomach even half of Leona's responsibilities no matter how hard he tried.

Nevertheless, Damien was forced to stop immersing himself in his thoughts. The sea...was not a friendly place.

This was Damien's first time taking a deep dive into the ocean since the World Awakening all those years ago. The oceans were a terrifying and beast-infested landscape where humanity had no place.

Now that reality sunk in for Damien, he began to realize this more and more.

His surroundings were already filled with the blood of beasts he'd killed. He did so mindlessly as he moved, since these beasts were too weak to attract his attention. But now that he took a closer look at the scenery around him, he couldn't help but feel anxious.

A wide and dark expanse similar to the starry sky, except here, he didn't have the same warm and comfortable feeling. At the same time, there were far more beasts in this environment than anywhere else in the world.

The blood around Damien was a lighthouse for these aquatic beasts. The ones Damien had seen thus far were weak, but the auras converging on the horizon weren't the same at all.

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"Have you had your fun yet? Let's go, we don't have time. You can play with the fishes when you finish up in the Challenge Gate." Leona suddenly said. As she did so, the approaching auras also became tame.

Damien rolled his eyes. Only a Star Master could look at terrifying aquatic beasts and call them fishes. In front of Leona, these beasts truly were docile.

Clicking his tongue, Damien responded, "tch. I don't really have time to explore though..."

Sadly, Damien only had a month of free time. He still had a long way to go before reaching Death Emperor Star, and he wouldn't feel comfortable going on any long and dangerous excursions until he was at least in its vicinity.

Damien sighed lamentably. 'Whatever. Death Emperor Star probably has an ocean on it too. And considering that world's reputation, it'll be infinitely more dangerous than this ocean.'

Consoling himself like so, he followed Leona for many more minutes until they finally reached a massive ancient gate floating in the depths of the ocean as if it belonged there. As Damien looked at it, he couldn't help but notice the similarities between it and the ancient gate he saw in the Storm Heavens Mystic Realm.

"I'll get going now and finish as soon as possible. Don't miss me too much while I'm gone." With a light wink and a simple goodbye, Damien left Leona behind and passed through the gate.

Leona shook her head wryly and watched him go. She was already several thousand years old, so she'd long since lost the right to participate in the Dimensional Leaderboard's activities. She could only use her privileges as the Azure Rain Star's Star Master to somewhat track Damien's progress.

'I wonder what you'll show me, so-called man of my destiny...' she thought to herself. Her figure slowly melded into the world, disappearing from the ocean entirely.

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The entire environment around Damien changed the second he stepped through the gate. Most noticeably, he was on dry land.

All around him were luscious and saturated green grasses that almost looked fake. The flowers growing from the ground were several mystical shades of bright color, and the trees towered higher than the eye could see.

It was an unruly scenery, but in its center was a single dirt path that seemed to be manmade. Damien stood at the start of this dirt path.

Immediately, he poured mana into his eyes. The All-Seeing Eyes activated, searching for an illusion, but just as soon as they activated, they were forcibly shut.

Bzzt!

"Ack!" Damien yelped as he rapidly closed his eyes. Two thick streams of bloody tears left his eyelids. In that moment, his eyes almost exploded.

'This...is this a restriction?'

Damien could tell that he was in an illusion based on spiritual power alone, but he couldn't shatter the illusion easily at all. The All-Seeing Eyes were a cheat code for this type of task, but as Damien just learned, using them was disallowed in this trial.

'I see...Leona did say it's a test of mental abilities. The All-Seeing Eyes are the bane of all mental abilities, but in themselves are a trait. Therefore, it isn't strange for them to be restricted.'

The All-Seeing Eyes were powerful, sure, but they also limited Damien. Since they were a fast pass to destroying any illusion-related or mental ability, his own mental abilities weren't given space to grow.

Now, such a chance had come along.

'I guess I'll be spending more time in here than I expected.'

With that thought, Damien began walking down the dirt path.

His steps led him through the forest. As he watched on, he found himself in tune with nature.

The breath of a dying tree ten kilometers away, the symbiotic relationship between a pale blue flower and a strange reptilian creature, the cycle of life, death, and reincarnation that forever repeated in all living things, Damien almost got sucked in by these simple yet profound sights.

But he kept walking, never allowing himself to veer off the main path. The second he did so, his mind would be forever lost in these illusions.

Rain poured in the forest. The rain nourished the plants and wildlife, promoting their growth. It filled the rivers and caused them to overflow, giving aquatic beasts more room to hunt. As the rain continued to pour, it flooded the forest entirely and formed a massive sea.

Damien kept walking. The waves picked him up as they grew. His feet barely touched the surface of the water. He never veered off the invisible path that his body was on.

The forest's ecosystem was destroyed by the sea. Marine life began to form, using those deceased plants and animals as sustenance to grow. Soon enough, the sea was populated by a plethora of creatures.

They grew and evolved at an even faster pace than the forest creatures, and the relationships between them were even more incredible. The sea even birthed some creatures who naturally had the intelligence of mortal humans even while being classless beasts.

But Damien remained unfazed. No matter how much beauty he was shown, his steps never diverged.

The sun in the sky became hotter and hotter. The sea evaporated with time and gave way to the sand below. Under the sun's intense heat, this sand began changing properties.

A desert formed. Damien watched how the biome functioned and how its ecosystem was built. After an unknown period of time, the desert froze into a tundra, the tundra became a swamp, the swamp became a wildland, the wildland became a jungle, and the cycle continued.

'The flow of all things...the universal system...' Damien muttered incoherently as he walked. He seemed to be on the precipice of something major, the tip of a heaven-shaking iceberg.

Yet, he was lacking the final push he needed to shatter the barrier between him and this truth.

He did, however, shatter a different barrier. The cycle of biomes continued shifting endlessly for a very long time, but eventually, Damien's tenacity won out.

After the cycle reset for the 118th time, everything paused like time stopped. And then, the scenery slowly crumbled away.

What was left was a small white room. Inside, there was a table and two chairs of the same color. Damien sat in one of these chairs and waited.

Soon, another man arrived in the room. He sat down in the chair opposite of Damien and looked at him.

"James."

"Damien."

"Good luck."

"Same to you."

Their conversation was short. The room limited their ability to speak.

Once they were ready, the table opened and a game board similar to chess emerged.

Damien looked at the board wryly. While intelligence wasn't the main focus of this challenge, it was surely a part of it.

Unfortunately for him, intelligence wasn't really his strong suit. Nor was strategy.

'To kill or not to kill...' Damien eyed James with squinted eyes. Killing him seemed like an easy solution, but he didn't think the Dimensional Leaderboard would like it very much if he did that. He didn't want to needlessly lower his score.

Just as Leona said before, every Challenge Gate tested only a single facet of a practitioner's abilities. Since this one was mental, he needed to stick to the script.

Besides, even if he lost this match, he could still bring his score back up in later tests. This was the benefit of Challenge Gates being singular cohesive tests instead of broad trials like Mystic Realms.

With one final sigh, Damien turned his attention back to the game. He had no idea how to even play, so he was just going to do whatever he wanted and pray that it worked out.

Chapter 635 Challenge Gate [3]

War wasn't fun.



Kings and Queens stayed on the back line, protected by their troops. Meanwhile, those petty soldiers on the battlefield were merely pawns abiding by their wills.

These pawns obeyed orders as if they had no conscious thought of their own. They were mindless slaves.

One day, a pawn woke up.

He realized his strange situation.

He questioned morality. He questioned why he fought and who he was fighting.

That pawn left his post. He traveled across the battlefield, avoiding those around him until he reached its end. There, he met the King and Queen.

He asked the King and Queen, "why must I suffer like this?"

However, he received no response. Neither the King nor the Queen acknowledged his presence.

Unfortunately, he wasn't strong enough to defeat them.

The pawn returned to the frontlines demoralized. From that day forth, he no longer fought. Instead, he walked and walked, hoping that one day he'd reach his destination.

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The Royal Knights were always renowned for their grandeur on the battlefield and staunch loyalty to the royal family. They were the kingdom's first and last line of defense.

These knights were powerful, sure, but they had no lives of their own. Their every action followed a set pattern, never to be broken.

A knight walked his usual route through the palace halls. His eyes gazed through the adjacent window at the beautiful sight of the kingdom below. This was the kingdom he swore to protect.

Seeing it now, he didn't feel the same. He wondered whether the kingdom he'd been serving was the same one he grew up in.

Wrought with plagues and crime, the nobles and commoners always in stark opposition, this wasn't the kingdom he knew. After the Crown Prince took the throne from the old King, everything changed.

It was his duty to protect the Royal Family, but he could no longer place his faith in the Royal Family.

He wanted to see this kingdom prosper and grow. What he swore to protect upon being knighted was the kingdom first. Everything else came after.

He clutched the old pendant hanging from his neck. A bold idea came to his mind. As if possessed, he immediately acted on it.

That night, the knight silently made his way into the King's chambers. Looking at the sleeping man, he sighed.

In another dimension, this man could've led a simple life as a commoner. Without the allure of great power, he never would've become the corrupt man he was today.

The knight's sword, which had been swung for the Royal Family for years, finally returned to its roots. It slashed through the air for the kingdom itself, taking the king's head.

That knight fled the kingdom the next day. He wanted to see change, but he didn't have the ability to bring forth that change. He could only start the wildfire that soon spread across the kingdom.

He was a close aide to the Royal Family and understood its workings well. Now that the King died, the Queen would hold temporary power until a new successor was raised.

And while the Queen was just as cunning as the King, she held consideration for her subjects. She understood how to maintain power.

If it wasn't for her silent hand guiding the King, the kingdom would've fallen into ruin long ago.

Now, the knight trusted the Queen with bringing order to the chaotic kingdom. While she did so, he walked.

He simply walked and walked, hoping that one day he'd reach his destination.

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The King was a good man, but he was not wise. He had the heart needed to rule, earning him the people's admiration, but he didn't have their respect. He simply couldn't do anything to aid the kingdom.

They'd been at war for years on end, yet the King had no way to end this conflict. People were dying by the day, yet he could only sit and watch.

He didn't want his position anymore. He didn't have the heart to let down these people.

His steps led him to a room he'd long forbidden. This was a place he never dared to enter ever since that day.

But now, he was back.

He pushed open the door. The room's stench permeated his nostrils the second he did so. But he didn't shy away.

He walked into the room and approached the coffin in the middle.

"Father, please forgive me," he said.

He opened the coffin's lid, allowing a decaying body to see the light of day. In the center of this body was a golden crystal.

The King reached into the body and took the crystal. Afterwards, he closed the coffin and left the room.

This crystal was the answer to his problems.

Therefore, he followed its light.

He eventually left the Royal Palace, left the capital, left the continent, and left the world itself. He simply continued walking.

He walked and walked, hoping that one day he'd reach his destination.

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In the darkness of night, four figures unknowingly crossed paths. Their meeting was unlucky, fated, and even comical in a sense.

They each came from different backgrounds, different walks of life, with different experiences. Still, they felt an odd chemistry between them.

The group sat down at a bar and began to converse.

One was a soldier. He spent years in the army fighting without cause, but when he finally escaped that torment, he realized he no longer had a home to return to.

One was a knight. He spent his entire life protecting those he served, but in the end, he killed his liege with his own hands. He walked through life carrying the burden of his greatest sin.

One was an undeserving ruler. His insecurity took hold of his heart and led him to stray from the correct path. Despite his attempts at salvaging the situation, he led his country to ruin. He fled in shame and guilt, never to look back again.

The final one was a bard. He was a man who traveled far and wide, seeing everything there was to see. Compared to the rest, his life experience was grander and his worldview broader.

As he looked at his new comrades, he questioned whether their paths should remain untouched.

But he couldn't allow these new friends to continue on being self-destructive. As the trio got increasingly drunk, he entertained them with song and story. The night continued as if it would never end, but when it finally did, the trio passed out on the bar table, unable to move an inch.

The bard sighed. He stood up and approached the three, searching through their belongings. From each, he took a single item.

From the soldier, his sword. That sword which symbolized his endless struggle on the battlefield. Even after he left, he always kept it at his side.

From the knight, his emblem. His treason was for the greater good. To this day, his loyalty to the kingdom never wavered. But that loyalty lay in his sword. This symbol only served to keep him attached to the Royal Family. Perhaps he knew this, but refused to remove it out of guilt.

From the King, a golden crystal. This crystal was proof of his negligence. He allowed himself to be ensnared by its charm, giving him an excuse to escape the kingdom he ruined. But the bard didn't take the King's crown. The King was a man who wished for good but could only do wrong. Perhaps, one day, he'd mold himself into someone worthy of the throne. The bard instead took the crystal, the crystal that symbolized the weight of his sin.

Finally, the bard stepped back. There were three items in his hands, but something was still missing.

The hard put the sword, emblem, and crystal down on the table and sighed. He reached into his pocket and grabbed a small locket.

This locket was a reminder of who he used to be.

It was time to return to being that person.

Chapter 636 Challenge Gate [4]

The vicissitude of time, the expansiveness of space, the trauma of war, the weight of sin. When one experienced so much, was it strange to change?

Life became numb. All things became meaningless. Death seemed inconsequential.

An infinite universe filled with infinite worlds, infinite people living within. In this vast and endless existence, what weight did a single person hold?

It was difficult to not despair in the face of such grandiosity. The realization of how tiny one's existence truly was could be mind-numbing.

But even those who gave into this reality lived their daily lives without pondering on it. It was pointless to do so.



But if one looked deeper, they'd realize the correspondence between universe and man; between microcosm and macrocosm.

Despite the minuteness of a single person's existence, mankind still thrived. Why was that? Why was it that life would always find a way to exist regardless of circumstance, regardless of futility?

It was a question impossible to answer without understanding the truths of the universe.

Therefore, people began contemplating these truths. They slowly found a way to adapt to them and grow to integrate them. In this way, evolution occurred.

Man no longer wanted to stand dichotomous to the universe. Man wanted to stand equal to it, to stand above it.

Mankind developed the ability to do so. With time and effort, the existence of a single person could trump that of the universe itself.

Or perhaps, a single existence could take the entire universe in the palm of his hand.

A sword, an emblem, a crystal, and a pendant. These four objects revolved endlessly in the infinity of space.

Their odd behavior made one question their existence, but even under the strictest of observation, these items were only found to be items; nothing more.

Without the allure of treasure, this great mystery was soon forgotten. The four benign objects continued to revolve around each other for eternity.

It was impossible to understand them.

None understood their history.

A sword reeking of blood and desolateness.

An emblem of contrasting loyalty and purpose.

A crystal of responsibility and desire.

And finally, a pendant.

Even those who knew the story of these four objects couldn't identify the pendant. It remained a profound mystery.

Years passed. Millennia passed. Eons passed.

A boy arrived in front of the four objects. He looked no more than 6 years old. His small hand reached out and took hold of the pendant.

"To return..."

His voice echoed through space. He carefully brushed his fingers across the pendant's surface, wiping away the damage that had covered it over the years.

"Returning, huh..."

The boy's body began to shine. Endless light converged upon the boy and the four objects.

The sword shuddered. It shot through space like a meteor and impaled the boy's body. Soon after, it melted and merged into him.

The boy's bloody aura soared. He looked about 10 years old, but he exuded the aura of someone who'd been killing their whole life.

The emblem shot out next. It burned itself into the boy's heart, melding into his body.

His eyes changed. The twinge of innocence in his eyes vanished, replaced by a multitude of complex emotions.

After the emblem was the crystal. It embedded itself in his forehead and melted, flowing through his veins.

An aura of power began emanating from his 15-year-old body. Ambition emerged in his heart. But at the same time, he felt a heavy weight on his shoulders; a burden he was forced to carry.

His eyes panned down to the pendant in his hand. He opened the seal on the locket, revealing what lay inside.

Three images. These images portrayed three different people.

A woman who tried to be perfect even though she was just learning the meaning of love.

A woman who was caged for most of her life and now truly experiencing the world now that she was free.

A woman whose feelings were turbulent, who was still understanding how to properly express herself and be the person she wanted to be.

These three women had led vastly different lives. Just like those three people the bard met before, they were united by fate. While they were very different people, they did share one commonality.

They were his safe space.

They kept him grounded. Their very existence allowed him to face reality and defy it without fear. They kept the negative emotions from plaguing his mind and taking over.

Memories rushed into the boy's mind.

He saw mountains of corpses and seas of blood.

He saw beasts and men alike, torn to shreds and piled up with the rest.

They were the manifestation of his bloodlust.

He saw an old man who, despite his greatness, remained humble and unassuming.

He saw an eccentric teacher who took pride in raising his students and seeing them succeed.

He saw countless figures, people who allowed him to move forward, people he wanted to protect.

They were the recipients of his loyalty.

He saw a world collapse, everything and everyone on its surface exterminated without fail.

He saw countless people suffering from atrocity, from destruction that plagued the entire universe.

They were the source of his responsibility.

The pendant in his hand liquified. He closed his eyes as he relished in the sense of completeness he felt.

When he opened his eyes again, he was a man in his mid-twenties. His eyes panned the surroundings curiously.

"To return..."

The surrounding space was covered in beams of starlight. The starry sky around him melted into liquid and rapidly drained through the crack in the room's door.

The room was white.

Two men sat inside, facing each other.

Between them, a chess-like game board.

The white pieces were nearly destroyed. Meanwhile, the black pieces had advanced far into enemy territory without any casualties.

The two men sat and stared into each other's eyes without a word. Their eyes were glazed and dull.

The man on the black side blinked. Clarity returned to his figure.

Thump.

The man on the white side collapsed. His head banged against the table, scattering the game pieces.

A click resounded through the room. A door appeared behind the dead man.

Damien looked at this door expressionlessly.

But he didn't enter.

He remained seated in his seat. The room turned hazy, the white walls transmuting into smoke and fading into the atmosphere.

His body became light. He became a divine dragon soaring through the heavens, plunged into the deepest of seas as a terrifying leviathan, and even explored the earth as a mere ant.

But his expression never changed.

Everything around him vanished. His body floated in a pitch-black space. He felt his mind becoming groggy. It was hard to think.

Time was present. It was far easier to realize than it was anywhere else. Every passing second echoed clearly in his head.

A red glow passed through his mind. The iridescent blue light of the stars shielded him from injury.

He sat in that blackness alone, unable to move, his thoughts his only company.



He began to wonder about many things. He wondered about questions that plagued his mind, secrets he'd yet to uncover, even new uses of his power.

Until one day, he lost the ability to think.

He could only blankly exist in the blackness, his consciousness both awake and restrained.

But regardless of the torment this condition caused him, his gaze never changed.

From start to finish, he was emotionless.

Chapter 637 Challenge Gate [5]

The illusion never ended.

The white room, the chess-like game, the man who played against Damien, none of them were real. Damien didn't realize it from start to finish.

But when the game started, something changed.

The illusion became more thorough. Damien's ego was picked apart and separated into different pieces, different characters whose lives he experienced. These illusions were influenced by Damien's soul, so they were far harder to detect.

As such, his consciousness almost became fully immersed in the illusion. He almost became those people he saw, his true ego never to reform.

The bard was the key. The locket he held was empty. It was just something he picked up during his travels. The images Damien saw when he opened its body were...his own memories.

Damien's emotionless face reflected in the pale blackness around him as it began to fade. His body was moved to a different white room, but this time, there was no challenge in front of him.

A golden scroll slowly unraveled. There, he saw that his name moved up two places. Presumably, he'd completed the Challenge Gate.

Only two places...was far less than his estimate. He didn't think his performance was necessarily bad. If so, it only meant that the people above him were better or had better track records.

This was only Damien's second interaction with the Dimensional Leaderboard. Without the large quantity of achievements other geniuses had, his only choice if he wanted to skip ranks was to accomplish the unimaginable.

Unfortunately, Damien wasn't perfect. If it was a physical trial, he had complete confidence in destroying everything and everyone around him. However, in a challenge like this one, he was at a natural disadvantage.

Nevertheless, Damien could only accept his results. This Challenge Gate didn't allow one multiple chances to pass.

His body was soon teleported out of the Challenge Gate. After meeting up with Leona, he traveled back to Seeking Lotus Palace quietly.

His face never changed.

He and Leona arrived at the sect and went straight to her office. Now that he'd done what she asked, it was time for her to do the same.

And Leona wasn't someone to break a promise. She led Damien to the sect's library and allowed him to peruse the shelves.

Over the next few hours, Damien skimmed every technique he could find. As he expected, the rumors about every disciple having a customized technique were false. However, it wasn't very far from the truth.

Seeking Lotus Palace's main techniques were similar to the Ananta Matrix in that they were built to evolve.

The Ethereal Seeking Lotus was a foundation. Once one successfully built that foundation, the technique would grow and change along with its user. This was why each Seeking Lotus Palace disciple seemed to have a technique perfectly suited for them.

Because although the technique wasn't as good as a personally tailored technique made by an expert, it was practically the next best thing!

Damien made his decision. He already had a friendly relationship with Seeking Lotus Palace especially after bonding with Leona over their shared class. Since their main technique was also amazing and would change itself to be perfect for Jiao Mei, there was no need for any more thinking.

After all, Damien didn't want to risk Jiao Mei's safety by being reckless. If Roaring Thunder Palace learned of Jiao Mei's existence too early and discovered her physique, she'd be in more trouble than she was equipped to handle.

The Roaring Thunder Palace was notoriously domineering, and while they never committed atrocities, they were still an "any means possible" type of sect. Damien visited Seeking Lotus Palace first because its environment seemed much more suitable for Jiao Mei.

After reaching this conclusion, Damien exited the library. He looked at the Seeking Lotus Palace around him, peacefully residing in its pocket dimension.

"Collapse."

His arm raised into the air and slammed down. Space trembled incessantly as Damien destroyed its foundations.

"Starfall."

Starlight shined upon his body. Damien used this starlight not to empower himself, but instead as a medium. He used it as a tether to shoot his awareness into the starry sky and read its layout.

After he did so, he clenched his fist and opened a portal in the sky.

Voom!

The portal eclipsed the entire Seeking Lotus Palace. No, the portal eclipsed the mountain entirely.

"Come."

Following Damien's command, an object slowly fell through the portal.

It wasn't rapid like a comet or piercing like a meteor, rather, it was moving at a snail's pace.

But that only made it more terrifying.

That object wasn't barren or dull. The small bit of its atmosphere that made its way through the portal was enough to announce its identity.

The object continued forward. By the time it made it halfway through the portal, it was already colliding with Azure Rain Star.

Damien's body flashed into the starry sky. As he departed, two worlds collided.

BOOOOOOOOOM!

The two worlds' crusts shattered instantly. All life on those worlds was decimated in an instant.

The World Cores collided soon after. A powerful fluctuation of mana blasted through the starry sky as they began merging into one. The entire area turned into a singularity.

"The Void cannot be imitated," Damien whispered as he watched on. Pitch-black exited his body and melded into the starry sky.

"Devour everything."

His essence spread. First, the two colliding planets were devoured, the space they resided in following soon after. The plague only spread from there.

From this tiny corner of the Divine Realm to covering its whole area was only a matter of minutes. Devouring the entire Grand Heavens Boundary would only take an hour at most.

Damien watched this happen without a word. As greater portions of existence disappeared, living beings united to defend against the scourge. At one point, even the Nox collaborated with the universe's forces. The Abyss was being swallowed as well.

Their efforts, however, were futile. Everything was inevitably consumed, and the time it took didn't exceed Damien's one-hour estimate.

He stood alone in the blackness. This blackness was neither existence nor nonexistence. It was the only thing left when even these two concepts were destroyed.

This wasn't something humans were meant to see.

Damien's eyes turned bloodshot. Even when he closed them, there was no difference. His ears buzzed as his eardrums burst. Blood leaked from his every orifice.

His mind collapsed instantly. The World Core Fusion Reactor and his bound worlds imploded as his spiritual world dissipated entirely, leaving him an idiot. Only seconds later...

Bang!

Damien's head exploded with a bang. But he didn't mind. This was far more comfortable than the terrific experience he'd just had.

He opened his eyes, gasping for breath.

"Haa...haa...haa..." a tinge of clarity reentered his eyes. As he looked around, he found himself in a familiar empty white room with a golden scroll floating in front of him.

His name was at the 418th position just as he'd seen prior.

Damien looked at the scroll, looked at his hands, looked at the room around him.

He didn't know.

He really couldn't tell.

Was this truly reality?

Or was he trapped in yet another illusion?

Chapter 638 Challenge Gate [6]



His hands trembled.

He felt a disociación from reality. No matter how real his surroundings were, he felt a disconcerting sense of distrust.

He shakily stood up and swiped away the Dimensional Leaderboard. He walked slowly, arriving in front of the nearest wall.

His hands brushed its surface. Despite its smooth appearance, it was coarse to the touch. It seemed to be made out of some unknown mineral.

Bang!

A single punch from Damien shattered the wall. His blood sprayed in the air as his fist shattered.

The pain wracked his body, and Transcendent Regeneration quickly did its job to heal him. However, that sense of distrust didn't go away.

"Let me out." He said. His body moved following his words, and in the next moment, he found himself back in the depths of the ocean.

The water's immense weight pressed down on his body. The cool, damp feeling on his skin as it coated him made him feel alive.

Sensation.

He didn't feel that in the Challenge Gate, despite the nature of the illusion.

It wasn't a coincidence. In fact, it was the reason he survived.

The moment he entered the Challenge Gate, he utilized the Void Heart Sword Law's Mind Prison to seal away a majority of his ego.

His body moved on instinct and rationality. His every move was calculated. Even when he tore the universe apart, he felt nothing.

Just the fact that he could feel sensation again meant the Mind Prison deactivated. If it did so, it meant he was out of danger.

He was truly in reality.

His body shuddered. The fact that he was still subconsciously unable to accept this truth just went to show the realism of those illusions.

"Hey, finally finished?"

A voice suddenly interrupted his thoughts. When Damien turned around, he saw Leona standing behind him.

"Mm, I just got out." He replied somewhat blandly.

Leona furrowed her brows. Damien's state wasn't natural. "Let's go back to the sect first. We can talk later."

Damien nodded again and slowly followed her. The two flew silently until they arrived back at Seeking Lotus Palace's pocket dimension.

While both of them could teleport, Leona understood that Damien needed time right now. Something must've happened in the Challenge Gate.

'That's strange...the other disciples who entered the gate didn't seem affected at all...what difficulty did the gate assign him?'

Leona's eyes narrowed. Challenge Gates would always give an individual a trial apt for their strength and potential. If Damien's trial was truly something that could faze him to this extent when he could even stare death in the eye calmly...

Then it only meant that both his strength and potential were heaven and earth compared to the standard.

While Leona attempted to rationalize her thoughts, Damien had already retreated to a secluded area he discovered after spreading his awareness.

This place was hidden between the various facilities of the sect, so it went largely unnoticed. Even now, it was completely empty.

But it was a truly beautiful place.

The scenery was simple. A single cherry blossom tree stood proudly in the center. Surrounding it was a bed of beautiful flowers that matched its colors. As the wind blew, the scent of cherry blossoms spread and calmed the mind. The soft trickling of water from a nearby stream only served to heighten the ambiance.

Damien sat down under the cherry blossom tree and closed his eyes. He needed time to process what had happened.

Compared to before he regained his ego, the events after were incredibly short. However, they were far more terrifying.

A perfectly replicated reality. From the people to the environment to even the foundational laws of the world and universe, they were all too accurate.

This wasn't information that a mere Dimensional Leaderboard should possess. In Damien's opinion, even a God didn't have the qualifications for this level of omnipotence.

He was forced to doubt reality itself. If it could be done once, who said it couldn't be done again?

Perhaps he was still on earth, comatose after the dungeon raid where he fell. Perhaps everything he saw now was an illusion of the mind. Or perhaps, someone put him under this illusion after learning of the Void Physique's existence.

To doubt reality itself wasn't rational. Even if Damien doubted it, he wasn't at a level where he could do anything about it.

The only straw he could grasp onto was the Void.

The Void cannot be imitated; these were the words he unconsciously spoke while destroying the universe.

As Damien looked at the pitch-black mana on his fingertips, he sighed.

Right, it was pointless to worry.

Even if this reality was fake, his experiences weren't. He at least knew that mana had to be real for his doubts to hold truth.

If mana existed, then the World Awakening truly happened. In that case, even if he was truly held captive and forced into this illusion, he'd be able to gain strength with time.

His comprehension couldn't be faked. His abilities couldn't be faked. These were things he earned with hard work and effort. Even if he lost them, he'd simply work hard enough to get them back.

Damien's closed eyes opened. Night had turned to day while he was drowned in his thoughts. At some point, Zara had emerged from his shadow as well.

Currently, Damien's head was shoved in her bosom as she held him. Realizing this, Damien smiled wryly.

'That Tang Lingzi...what is she teaching you?'

He carefully extracted himself from her grip, even utilizing space to do so without creating a disturbance. Seeing Zara sleep so peacefully, he couldn't bear to wake her up.

'Phew...enough contemplating bullshit. I'm tired of overthinking.'

He teleported through the Seeking Lotus Palace's grounds until he arrived at Leona's residence. Before he could even knock, she opened the door.

"Come in. I've been waiting to talk to you."

Damien nodded and entered. The following conversation...almost exactly followed the flow of the conversation he had with her in the illusion.

After some discussion about the Challenge Gate and what happened inside, she allowed him to view the sect's techniques.

And just as he'd seen before, the Ethereal Seeking Lotus was truly an evolutionary technique. It was the exact same.

Damien once again shuddered at the realism of that illusion. At the same time, however, he felt relieved that a good amount of his time was saved because of it.

He didn't have to think about his decision anymore since he'd already made it long ago when he first saw the Seeking Lotus Palace's techniques.

With this in mind, he returned to Leona and told her the good news. After he spoke to Jiao Mei and got her opinion, he'd bring her to visit the sect so she could make an informed decision.

But until then...

Leona had another matter to discuss with Damien.

"So...as you know, I follow the sect's traditions without fail to disguise my identity as this world's Star Master. Now that I've continued this facade for so long, if I fail to do so even once, people will question it." She said hesitantly.

Damien tilted his head in confusion. "Okay, and?"

"And..." Leona continued. "I think we have to get married."

Chapter 639 Broader Horizons[1]

"And..."

"I think we might have to get married."

Damien rubbed his forehead in exasperation. After the Challenge Gate's madness, he'd completely forgotten about this troublesome situation he'd landed in.

But right now, he didn't have the energy to entertain the thought at all. He simply wanted to leave Jiao Mei in the Seeking Lotus Palace's care and leave.

"Do you want to get married?" He asked.



"Not particularly," Leona responded immediately.

"Then we won't. It's that simple."

"But it isn't. News spreads quickly in our world. The fact that you conquered the mountain trial is already known by all the major influences. If I refuse to marry you, it will truly cause problems." Leona sighed.

"Still," Damien shook his head and said, "I have no interest in getting married. I'm sure you don't want this burden holding you down either. Therefore, let's do something simpler."

"And that is?"

"Every heard of Death Emperor Star?"

Leona jumped slightly upon its mention. Who didn't know of Death Emperor Star? It was an influence that every genius dreamed of but barely any were able to reach.

"There isn't a single talent in the universe who doesn't know of its most prestigious academy and training ground. But why are you bringing it up?" She asked. But in the next instant, her eyes widened.

She'd seen Damien's talent personally, after all. It wasn't too hard to understand his intent.

"You...you are going to Death Emperor Star...how?"

Damien shrugged. "I met a guy and he recommended me. I heard it's a good place to train so I'm going to check it out."

"I...I see..." Leona didn't know how to react to his casual response. Internally, she was really itching to strangle him.

Nevertheless, if it was Death Emperor Star, then there truly was a much simpler solution.

"Geniuses who train on Death Emperor Star usually do so for an undetermined amount of time...and with the war on the horizon, people don't have as much energy to focus on minor matters...Azure Rain Star is slowly becoming an important strategic point in the supply chain so our experts tend to be preoccupied...it could work." She finally nodded her head.

Announcing that Damien was going to Death Emperor Star would only reap positive results. Aside from conveniently delaying Damien and Leona's marriage until its existence became inconsequential, it would also help Seeking Lotus Palace gain influence and power even beyond Azure Rain Star.

The status of a Death Emperor Star trainee wasn't light at all. And if one could become a Paragon, their status would be nigh-untouchable.

Most likely, Damien and Leona would never meet again. If they did, it would be on the battlefield when the flames of war spread out of control. This solution was more than enough to deal with their situation.

Therefore, Leona didn't hesitate.

"I'll announce the news after your departure. I'll have to reveal your name and ranking on the Dimensional Leaderboard as well to corroborate my story. Is that okay with you?"

"Mm, that's more than enough," Damien said with a smile.

There was a reason he always chose a big influence to join when he went to a new world. The backing of a major influence was a perfect tool to get him out of complicated social situations. It also granted him far more leeway in his actions.

Whether it be arrogant young geniuses who would've attempted to start problems with him, old monsters who could've killed him in a single blow, or even young women in situations similar to this one, they'd all be dealt with easily.

The marriage conversation ended just like that. The two of them were fellow Celestials and had a budding friendship forming between them due to this. The previous matter would only stain their relationship if they lingered on it.

After forgetting about the issue entirely, they talked a bit more about various subjects, mostly surrounding the war. Half an hour later, Damien walked out of Leona's residence and returned to his own.

And then, his body disappeared into the void.

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When Damien reappeared, he was floating above the Sanctuary. Now that its previous land had formed into a proper world, his location was a place similar to the starry sky.

'This world needs a new name since the Sanctuary is expanding. I'll just let the residents pick.' He thought to himself as he observed the world's progress.

In total, there were only around 7 million people in this world. They didn't take up even a portion of its space.

However, the areas they did occupy were far different from the grassy wildlands Damien remembered.

It'd been roughly three years since the 3000 Beast Mountain Range's population was transported to the Sanctuary. During that time, their civilization flourished.

The elves spread out far beyond the other four races. Previously, they'd lived in a massive city that accommodated their number. This was due to the 3000 Beast Mountain Range's dangers.

Now that they had space, why would they do the same? The Sanctuary's Elven Kingdom was flourishing and widespread. The plains were mostly occupied by them.

The Fire and Ice Phoenix Clans settled in the singular mountain in the distance. When Damien observed it, he realized that it'd transformed into a natural volcano with the expansion of the Sanctuary.

The Fire Phoenix Clan lived at the precipice of this volcano and utilized its rampaging fire energy for their own convenience. As for the Ice Phoenix Clan, they lived at the base of the mountain on the seashore. While there weren't any extreme cold environments for them to flourish in, water was the next best thing.

Finally, White Dragon Grotto and Lucius' group of demons. These groups went east into a desert-like area. Because their ideals were similar, they lived in close proximity and interacted often.

There weren't enough Demons with Lucius for them to form a separate community anyway. Cooperating with one of the other races was in their best interest.

Nevertheless, the Sanctuary was a true world now, a world that would expand into a universe as soon as he could make it happen.

Seeing its growth, Damien couldn't help but be proud. He basked in this feeling for a few seconds before locating Jiao Mei.

Currently, she was with Xue'er, Elitra, and a few Elven girls. Just as she was about to speak, she found the scenery around her instantly shift.

"Jiao Mei, how've your past few months been?" Damien asked with a smile. He could see that the girl integrated into the Sanctuary's community well.

Jiao Mei's eyes widened when she heard his voice. "Ah! Where've you been?! How'd you get here? How'd I get here?" She fired off a flurry of confused questions.

Damien chuckled lightly and answered with a shrug. "I'm a spatial practitioner. If I couldn't do this much, it would be a disappointment."

Jiao Mei slowly regained her senses over the next few minutes and spoke to Damien about her love for the Sanctuary. It seemed she found true friends in Elitra and those elves and a little sister in Xue'er.

Hearing her talk, Damien almost didn't want to tell her about Seeking Lotus Palace. But in the end, he understood that the choice was ultimately hers to make.

"I came today to fulfill a promise I made to you 3 months back. How about it? Do you want to explore the world or do you want to stay here?"

Chapter 640 Broader Horizons[2]

Jiao Mei closed her mouth upon hearing his question. When she first answered, she did so with surety. Now, however, she was hesitant.

She friends she made here and the comfort she felt were addictive. She didn't want to leave this atmosphere and enter a world of unknowns and enemies. The outside was terrifying, but in this world it was beautiful.

Her eyes clouded over. She thought back to the life she lived. She was born into a prestigious family and adopted into a prestigious sect when that family kicked her out. She was loved by all due to her talent and physique and never experienced the world for what it truly was.

When she met Damien, she realized what true practitioners looked like. They were ruthless and indifferent, killing as they saw fit and demanding respect with their presence alone. For the sake of strength, they were willing to risk everything, even their own lives.

Compared to true practitioners, the people who surrounded her in the Dawn World were dirt. The reason she chose to travel with Damien was that she no longer wanted to be dirt.

If she chose this comfort and security over risking everything for strength, she'd live happily, but she'd never achieve anything. Her path would end here.

But if she chose to explore the wider universe, she'd expose herself to countless dangers that could take her life in an instant. She'd have to be wary at all times and she'd have to face reality without any shelter to rely on.

'No, that's not true.' She realized. While it was mostly true, she wouldn't be without shelter on her journey. The man in front of her had guaranteed a place for her to grow in peace when she was tired of danger.

A definitive decision finally took root in her mind. This path, the one she saw Damien illustriously walking, she wanted to experience it for herself.

"Take me. I choose strength."

Damien smiled. "Very well. Then, allow me to introduce you to Seeking Lotus Palace and the wider Azure Rain Star. As long as you like it, this will be your starting point. From here on, you'll grow limitlessly as long as you have the will and remain alive."

Damien allowed Jiao Mei a few minutes to say goodbye to Elitra and the rest. Afterwards, their two bodies vanished from the Sanctuary.

Seeking Lotus Palace revealed itself grandly to Jiao Mei's eyes. It's beautiful scenery, the stunning amount of mana in the air that was greater than anything she'd ever felt on the Dawn World, powerful disciples that could defeat her without even trying; Jiao Mei experienced a serious case of culture shock as she struggled to take everything in.

But over time, she was slowly able to accept her new reality as Damien took her around the sect. Not only was the atmosphere and ambiance great for training, it was even an all-woman sect where she wouldn't have to deal with nonsensical people who lusted after her beauty and talent. The more she saw of the sect, the more she liked it.

Besides, Damien was the one who chose it for her. Even if she wasn't given the chance to see the sect before joining, she'd still agree in an instant.



Her decision to join was essentially set in stone.

Leona and Sierra arrived near the end of the tour. They truly wanted to see the girl Damien went through so much trouble to enroll in the sect.

And after seeing her physique, they let out a collective gasp of astonishment.

"You idiot!" Leona scolded as she smacked Damien atop the head. "If you told me she had an innate Heavenly Lightning Seed from the beginning, we wouldn't have been forced to deal with all the other nonsense!"

"No, well, the issues were really a you thing more than a me thing..."

"I can't believe this... it's truly magnificent...although it hasn't developed into its true form yet, it's been fed a small amount of Heavenly Lightning and has begun to bud. This is amazing!" Sierra joined her.

"Mm, mm. Real good. I definitely know what an innate Heavenly Lightning Seed is."

"Your name was Jiao Mei, correct? If you join our Seeking Lotus Palace, you won't be disappointed at all. I'll allow you to practice our sect's special Ethereal Seeking Lotus technique without any prerequisites and I'll even let the Vice Palace Master teach you personally."

"No, but the Ethereal Seeking Lotus thing was something we already agreed upon. Also, Sierra is the Vice Palace Master and she's been drooling over Jiao Mei ever since she saw her physique so I think her tutelage would happen regardless as well..."

"Jiao Mei, I am this illustrious sect's Vice Palace Master. And just like you, I am a lightning expert. Under my guidance, I'm sure you'll grow amazingly."

"Since when did you become a lightning practitioner? Also, how long is this going to continue for? Tch, women."

""Hm?""

Three collective sounds of suspicion entered his ears. Damien smiled smugly. "So you finally acknowledge my presence, huh? Stop pressing Jiao Mei so much and let her talk, damn."

The three women stared at him blankly.

"Jiao Mei, how do you feel about becoming a disciple of our sect?" Leona asked blandly.

"I would love to." Jiao Mei responded in the same tone.

"Good. Then, for your first sect mission, aid your Palace Master in punishing a delinquent!" Leona declared.

"With pleasure!" Jiao Mei exclaimed with an evil smile.

"Woah, woah, woah. Let's all calm down a bit. After all, we're all—" Damien immediately escaped Seeking Lotus Palace's pocket dimension and ran away.

He knew he was poking a bear but still made the conscious decision to poke it. There was no way he'd stay around to see the aftermath.

Still, thinking about their faces, he broke out into wild laughter. He laughed harder than he had in a very long time.

Having light fun like this, it really was something he needed to do more often.

Nevertheless, now wasn't the time for it. He looked into the distance at the Seeking Lotus Palace's location with a small smile.

Goodbyes weren't his strong suit. He already made arrangements with Jiao Mei to leave her followers in the Sanctuary and even promised to visit her later so she could reunite with them. Anything more would be excessive.

As for the rest...well, he didn't know them well enough to have a soppy goodbye with them anyway.

"I'll be headed off now. Next time I see you, you better not be weaker than me." He muttered to no one in particular.

On Azure Rain Star's surface, a single woman smiled while looking up into the clouds. In her mind, she heard every word he said clearly.

'Arrogant brat...acting like I'm not already a few thousand years older than him...very well, then. I can't just neglect such blatant provocation. Let's see which of our paths is king.'

Her silent goodbye seemed to be mirrored in by the world itself. Jiao Mei followed Leona's gaze with a twinge of sorrow in her eyes.

Thereafter, Damien's figure vanished, returning to the starry sky to continue his long journey.

The time he had remaining to reach Death Emperor Star was only a little over two months.