

DEMONS 1031

Chapter 1031 Bodeir VS Voldar

"BEGIN" shouted the announcer as he kicked off the ground, leaving behind his own crater as he left the arena. Careful observation would reveal that despite the fact the crater seemed to be a result of too much force applied when the announcer jumped, looking closer revealed a different story. The crater was perfectly symmetrical, cracks reaching equally to either side of the arena and providing the same number of obstacles for both contestants. This announcer was clearly a cultivator in his own right, and likely much more powerful than the contestants.

I wonder how many people noticed that...

[Well, I certainly didn't tell you mentally pointed it out. My eyes are good... but I'm not able to see a crater, process the creation of the crater, and catalogue all the similarities in less than a second.]

Kat didn't know what to say to that. Both because she had no good answer, and because while they were mentally chatting the match had already started. Voldar sped forward and unleashed a flurry of blows onto Bodeir. Bodeir, remained rooted and strong against the assault, blocking even the large hammer strikes with a palm or thigh, depending on where it was aimed.

Voldar was elegant in his assault. Despite being a dwarf, and quite a rounded one at that, he moved like a dancer and flowed from one stance to another as he used as much leverage as he could to unleash a chain of attacks, usually with his hammer. Each blow upon Bodeir's body rang out like a deep gong, but Bodeir remained strong. The only proof it was having any effect at all was actually if you looked at Bodeir's feet.

Bodeir's stance was still perfect, a heavy set horse riding stance that shifted as needed... but the ground beneath his feet cracked with every blow, sending him deeper and deeper into the ground with every blow of the hammer, and strike of Voldar's fist. Bodeir seemed remarkably unconcerned with this, and was even going with the flow, allowing the chipped and broken bits of the arena floor to flow up his legs.

Voldar, snarled at the clearly lacking reactions from Bodeir and switched tactics. He planted his feet and brought up a slow, heaving swing in an overhead strike, attempting to really slam into Bodeir.

Unfortunately, despite Bodeir's immobility up to this point, the elf wasn't simply a punching bag. Bodeir dashed forward as the hammer reached its apex and slammed a palm into Voldar's metal plated stomach. The dwarf flinched, knocking his strike off-course and killing most of the power.

More power was lost when Bodeir followed up his palm strike, with a knife hand chop to Voldar's elbow, causing the dwarf to drop the hammer and abandon his attack. Voldar rolled with the momentum on his arm in an attempt to escape from Bodeir, but the elf gripped hard on Voldar's arm locking him in place.

Gritting his teeth, Voldar suddenly increased the gravity on his body by a massive amount and just let himself drop, ripping his arm from Bodeir's hand, even as he crashed into the ground, causing a large crater and the shaking of the arena. Bodeir stood strong, the dirt around his feet remaining intact despite the large impact. The elf followed up Voldar's attempt to escape by stomping down on the dwarf, who flipped the heavy gravity to the side, and sent himself flying towards his hammer.

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Bodeir kicked the ground to get some loose debris, and sent them after Voldar, but it was in a mostly half-hearted attempt to disrupt the dwarf. Voldar flipped around his hammer, landing heavily and breathing a bit hard. Voldar simply let the rocks strike him, to seemingly no effect, the clumps of stone breaking upon his armour. Bodeir though, smiled as the finer bits of sand started to seep into the dwarf's armour. Not useful now... but perhaps later.

Voldar growled as he glared at Bodeir. The annoying elf had managed to simply shake off his weight increasing effects, if they were even active in the first place. As Bodeir stood amongst the shattered pieces of the arena, the small area around his feet was very conspicuously intact. Even if he had managed to overcome the extra gravity to move, it should've cracked the floor again... that is, if the gravity increase had worked at all. It seemed that it had not, at least in Voldar's mind.

He was completely wrong. Bodeir had specifically strengthened this bit of arena purely by instinct when he'd dashed in, and simply held the ground together when Voldar crashed into it. Footing was key to his sect's martial forms, and getting caught on awkward terrain was really easy to avoid when you made sure the terrain was flat and steady. It was a basic teaching tool.

For Bodeir, this was an easy first exchange. For Voldar, it seemed like he needed to swap up his entire strategy. Instead of carefully wearing Bodeir down with low-cost techniques over an extended period of time he'd need to blitz the elf. The elf who specialised in earth aligned defence.

Unaware of each other's thoughts, the match resumed. Voldar dashed forward, and his once flowing movements changed into a series of almost drunken looking flailing. Wide but quick swings that seemed to speed up an instant before impact, where Voldar drastically increased the weight on just the tip of his hammer, then letting that extra weight throw him around as he bounced all around Bodeir.

Through this new series of attacks, Bodeir stood strong, though he did summon up a coating of earth to help with his defence. It cracked, each and every time it was struck, but a flex of Bodeir's will and the flowing earthen coating was repaired and none the worse for wear. The match continued like this for a while, developing into a stalemate. No matter how heavy Voldar made his hammer, Bodeir stood strong. No matter how quickly he struck again, Bodeir's earth armour was already repaired.

Voldar didn't know what to do, so he slammed one final heavy hit into Bodeir and used it to launch himself away from the annoying earth cultivator. Voldar was panting and covered in sweat. His muscles burned and his qi reserves weren't looking particularly good either. He cursed mentally as he considered his options. His attacks weren't doing enough, and he didn't trust Bodeir to just stand there for long if he looked like he was just taking the chance to recover, even this moment to think was a blessing Voldar didn't want to count on.

It was eventually a simple thought that got Voldar grinning. What if I make him heavier? Voldar had already tried to increase gravity and slam Bodeir into the ground. It was his go to technique because despite what one might think, the world seemed to more actively resist decreasing gravity on things, so he could get a lot more effect for his qi by going that route... but what if Bodeir needed to remain in contact with the ground?

Voldar smiled, and transferred most of his remaining qi into his hammer, ready for Bodeir to block. Bodeir did, of course, and Voldar slammed the hammer into Bodeir's waiting palm. Instead of floating of as expected though... Bodeir remained planted on the ground. Voldar's mind was filled with despair.

“FUCK!” shouted the dwarf, even as he changed his grip on his hammer and tried to send Bodeir flying by treating his hammer as a golf club.

Bodeir blocked the hammer with his foot... and that was enough. He was sent flying into the air. The reduced gravity and having only a single foot on the ground was enough. “YES!” shouted Voldar in triumph, mood bouncing back upon seeing his opponent’s mistake. Voldar launched himself after Bodeir and slammed his hammer into the elf, sending him off to the side, going for a ring out.

Bodeir however, slammed into the shield around the arena, and Voldar had a moment of horror as he remained one line from the sign up sheet. ‘Due to the nature of defences on the semi-finals arena, ring outs will not be possible’.

Voldar felt something in him crack, even as Bodeir kicked off the wall and was coming right for his face. Voldar was exhausted. Reducing Bodeir’s weight by so much, and then putting a bunch of qi behind the launch? It was too much. His qi was spent, and his resolve was broken.

Bodeir’s fist slammed into the dwarf’s face. And Voldar was unconscious before he hit the ground.

Chapter 1032 Bit of a Voldar Bash

“THE MATCH IS OVER FOLKS. BODEIR FROM THE MOUNTAIN SHAKER SECT IS MOVING ON TO THE GRAND FINALE! Just give us some time to fix up the arena and we’ll be on to the next second semi-final match!” said the announcer, finally dropping the volume of his voice. Kat was thankful, even if it was only for the one sentence.

While Kat was rejoicing over the announcer’s volume choices, and everyone else was fairly distracted, Bing watched as Voldar was taken off the arena by medics, and Bodeir walked confidently off the stage... until he made it to the tunnels where he nearly collapsed, leaning heavily against the wall for support. Bing’s eyes shone, as she took in that little detail.

“What a match,” said Kat, unaware of Bing’s thoughts, “Bodeir managed to do really well... I thought it would be closer but honestly this was probably still the most challenging match Bodeir has had to fight so far,”

“You don’t know the half of it,” said Bing with a grin. The rest of the girls turned to look, questions in their eyes... well except Lian. She was still slumped in the chair, and trying to get her qi levels back up. “Bing was much closer to losing then he made it out to be, he nearly collapsed leaving the stadium,”

“Really? How much qi do you think he has left?” asked ‘Lily’

“Hard to say... Bodeir uses techniques that take a pretty heavy toll on his body. Even if he’s using qi to mitigate the damage, it’s not an easy style of martial arts to use. His whole thing is making sure he uses less energy blocking than his attackers use trying to take him down. He could be nearly out of qi... or his muscles could be in agonising pain and his qi could be more than half full. It’s really hard to tell with him... it’s what makes the Mountain Shaker Style so risky, but so good. It’s hard to tell just how much fight they have left in them. Fighting through muscle pain is annoying, and painful, obviously, but very possible. It’s not possible to use more qi once you’re bottomed out though...” explained Bing with a shrug.

“Well... how close do you think that match was?” asked Sue, “To me, it didn’t look close at all, in fact, I think Bodeir had more issues with his first match than he had in this one,”

Bing shrugged, “Well... it really comes down to how much qi he has but I can’t sense that sort of detail from such a long way away. I think... hmm... well I think it came down to a few things. The first is that Voldar is clearly unfamiliar with Bodeir’s style. He seemed to think his gravity incrementing strikes weren’t actually doing anything and Bodeir was just faking things, at least, that’s my assumption regarding why he went to trying to lighten Bodeir later on.

“It was very much the right idea... but Voldar was clearly getting desperate when he tried it. If he’d removed Bodeir from the floor early on he would’ve been able to do so much more damage as Bodeir scrambled to get back to the ground. It’s his connection with the earth that lets him disperse so much damage easily with his qi. If Bodeir was stuck in the air, he’d need to take a big chunk of earth with him, wasting more qi, or burn qi to keep himself stuck to the floor. *NoVelnext.cOmm*

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“What really clinched it for Bodeir though... was that moment of shock after Voldar tried to whack Bodeir out of the arena. That moment Bodeir collided with the barrier? He was so shocked. I suspect he used all, or almost all, of his qi in one final strike in an attempt to win with a ring out, knowing that it was unlikely he, that is Voldar, could win any other way. He was clearly exhausted, and Bodeir was looking remarkably fine at the time. Another thing pointing to Voldar’s lacking knowledge of a very famous style,

“Of course, another big mistake was thinking Bodeir was unaffected by the gravity increases... but honestly I can’t say how big of a mistake that was. Bodeir wasn’t exactly bluffing, from what I could tell it just didn’t matter all that much to his techniques, and his body is tough enough that the increased gravity wasn’t causing his internal organs any issues. Still, it was likely a big waste of energy trying to decrease the gravity on someone you’d already increased the gravity on, fighting part of your own technique. Voldar was so desperate he likely didn’t even notice that part,”

Hmm... I suppose I wasn’t really thinking about all of that. In fact, I sure why Voldar switched tactics mid match anyway. I had guesses, but Bing seems much more certain. I suppose it comes from her own experience fighting the style? “Is the Mountain Shaker Style particularly strong against blunt trauma? Or would it work fine against bladed weapons as well?” asked Kat.

Bing made a ‘so-so’ gesture, “As something consider a top tier cultivation style, it can’t have such an obvious weakness as ‘stick the cultivator with the pointy end’ so... no, in general it isn’t weak against bladed weapons, it even has a number of techniques specifically made to destroy, or dull weapons used to attack it’s practitioners to discourage that very thing... of course... with that being said...

“It cannot be denied that it is exceptional at dealing with blunt force trauma, and damage dealt from qi techniques. The second is more important than the first, normally, but at this level qi techniques are much less of a concern. Most qi techniques at Rank 2 are all about supporting your body, or the most basic of ranged attacks, that standard qi shielding is able to block most of it you have any skill at all,” explained Bing.

“I see...” mumbled Sue.

"Well, we've ragged on Voldar a bunch for his panicking, and his lack of knowledge... but did he deserve to be there? Did he just get lucky? The announcer implied no... but that might've just been hype..." said Kat.

"I'd have lost I think," chipped in Lian from the side.

"Don't be too harsh on yourself Lian," said Bing.

"Ha, don't even try that. His little trick that let him walk on air up to the stage? That would decimate a whole bunch of my techniques. Add on top of that the fact my metal pillars didn't provide any arial defence, and that my slowing curse is partially gravity based and he could ignore all of my techniques except my basic shield with a bit of effort... and you should know that while my shield is good... it's not perfect and Voldar is efficient..." said Lian.

Bing sighed, and said, "I don't like how harsh you're being on yourself..."

"But you agree with me right?" shot back Lian.

"Yes fine, I agree with you," admitting Bing with a pout. "It's a bad matchup... but I'm not sure I'd be all that much better. Voldar has clearly mastered multiple forms of combat and I'm not sure my sword would be able to hold up against multiple gravity strikes from his hammer. I'd need to dodge everything... and if I messed up just once? Perhaps even just if he clipped my hair or robes? Then I'm out of the game. I'd get slower and slower until I lost. I don't think I could beat him without a good deal of luck myself..."

"Do you think Feng can beat him? Or well, would've beaten him if it was Voldar that one?" asked 'Lily'.

"Hmmm... probably?" said Bing carefully. "I can't say for sure... and I think it really depends on how easily Voldar can deal with the cold. Feng and Voldar have somewhat similar fighting styles, Feng likes to slowly apply more and more chilling effects by constantly attacking with duel knives that he likes to use. I suppose it'd be whoever was overcome first.

"I think Feng would win? He has a faster weapon, and two of them. If they were trading blows, Feng should come out on top... but with Voldar's ability to weigh down his hammer, a more direct clash that wasn't about stacking effects could see Feng lose. I think it'd be a close match... but I believe in my brother. So... I'd give the win to him in this imaginary bout.

"Naw... a bit of a bro-con are we?" said Sue.

"A... what?" asked Bing confused.

"A bro-con, someone who... really loves their brother," explained Sue with a grin, letting more of her intent leak into the words.

Bing's face instantly twisted into one of disgust as the more... 'mature' ... meaning of the word. "Gross. Soooo gross Sue," grumbled Bing.

Sue just shrugged, "Well, if you're not interested does that mean he's free game for me?" asked Sue 'innocently'.

Bing was about to reply with just how gross that thought as well... but realised she'd be playing right into Sue's hands, so instead she said, "If you think you can get past my parents and court my brother? Or just fuck him? Well, that's your business really,"

"You're learning," said Sue. "Good, it wouldn't be any fun otherwise,"

Chapter 1033 A Conversation Killer

Bing got up and spun, removing her ice pack and robes to put on something much more gaudy. These new robes were clearly ceremonial in nature, they were a light, sky blue, with faint green wind lines sewn into the soft silk surface. She had pauldrons on her shoulder, one blue and one green, with a gold outline encasing them both. Her shoes had transformed into golden riding boots with green wings etched into the sides. On her head now sat a thin circlet that looked like golden wind reaching up to a point, holding a large blue sapphire in the centre.

The piece that brought it all together was the sword and scabbard on her back. The scabbard itself was a work of art, showing off a snowy landscape with golden wind that wound itself between the incredibly detailed brushwork of the trees and icy rivers that dotted the landscape. When Bing drew the sword and gave it a few practice swings, Kat could see the golden cap and guard surrounding a green leather handle. The blade itself was devastatingly thin, and had stylised wind etchings swirling towards the point.

After a quick adjustment of the rather plain blue belt, and a few more swings of the sword, Bing returned it to her sheath and started to stretch, taking very little care with how it emphasised her ass, or the fact Sue could see down Bing's shirt. "Blue lace... nice," said Sue with a grin.

"Oh? She's got the lace set on today?" chimed in Lian, "That's a surprise. I didn't think Bing would break something like that out just for a fight against her brother. I guess she's got someone to impress now though," Lian finished off her sentence by shooting Sue a look and wiggling her eyebrows.

"Eugh, don't you pair start now. I'm about to go, show off the ridiculous routine our parents forced us to learn as our entrance, and then lose to my brother. The only question is, how much effort I'm going to put into the fight afterwards," grumbled Bing.

"Well that really depends, how mad are you at your brother right now?" asked Lian with a cheeky grin.

"Hmm... not that mad? He hasn't done anything to annoy me in at least a week and I plan on starting my part of the show from this box instead of the entrance like I'm meant to, so that will piss him off in a big way..." mumbled Bing.

"You could use that," pointed out Sue, "Keep him angry and not thinking straight and then go looking for an opening? I imagine as his sister you have plenty of ways to make Feng angry,"

"That's... not impossible..." said Bing slowly, "... I suppose the only thing that would make me unsure is it would still take a lot of qi and I'm not really doing myself any favours in a matchup against Bodeir. If I'm not treating it like a fight to the death, I don't think I could take him down. That means I probably lose... then I get a bunch of people who will yell at me for taking Feng out of the competition with a cheap trick, and losing to Bodeir afterwards,"

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“Why would it be different if this was a fight to the death?” asked Kat.

“You really don’t know?” asked Bing with narrowed eyes as she bent to the side, continuing her stretching. Kat shrugged and so Bing continued, “I’d go for the eyes or the neck Kat. I might not be able to beat him in a tournament setting, but a fast moving, qi infused spike of vibrating air straight into his eye socket and brain? That can kill a lot of people, and with us both at the same Rank, he’d die,”

“Woah... that’s... um... yeah that’s a bit deadly,” said Kat trying not to expose too much of her shock. It just made sense really. Bing was trained for combat, and sometimes that combat needed to be deadly. The eyes were weak points for cultivators and most spirit beasts. Qi did wonders to improve the body, and the eyes were no exception... but it was a multiplicative effect. The eye of a cultivator might be a hundred times tougher than a normal eye... but it was still an eye. Much weaker than bone or steel.

“Does that bother you?” asked Bing, pausing her movements, “that I’m able to talk so casually about potentially killing someone?”

Well... I don’t know how to answer that. This is a very different world, and I’ve killed at this point as well... might just be something to do with the fact that I’m a demon but... hmm... perhaps I should just share that story about Grumpy maybe?

With a wave of affirmation from Lily’s end of the link, Kat started to speak, “Not really? I mean, it is a bit distasteful in the abstract, and as someone currently contracted to keep Bodeir alive, I can’t say I’m pleased to hear that sort of talk,” Bing winced, having somewhat forgotten Kat wasn’t just here as her friend, but as Bodeir’s bodyguard. Admitting to being able to kill the person she trying to protect really wasn’t the best look, “but I have come to terms with death, and killing.

“I suppose I should tell you about a girl I call Grumpy. I don’t know her name, she didn’t provide it. I was on another Contract to rescue someone from a sect, and during the breakout I lead the main defender, Grumpy, off on a wild goose chase through the woods. She was unhappy, just having been woken up and forced to chase me... all in an attempt to delay me until the sect patriarch arrived, or if she was skilled enough, take me out herself.

“I tried to reason with her, offered her an out... explained the difference in combat strength... and she refused. Wanted a warrior’s death, that if she walked away her punishment would be much worse than the risk of death. She was quite insistent about it... so... in one strike, we traded blows. She cut down to my bones with her halberd and I punched straight through her ribs and hit her heart with enough force to cause it to explode. Then, instead of cursing my name, or complaining, she said she regretted she wasn’t stronger, and hoped for a better life when she reincarnated,”

“Huh... that... yea I know some people like that,” said Bing. “I can say that, from what I know of those sorts of people, she genuinely would have held no ill will against you for killing her. In fact, if she had any hatred in her heart, it was probably for her sect patriarch or direct superior that forced her to chase after you instead. Those types of cultivators are weird... and often weirdly powerful to. She just got unlucky,”

“I can’t say it bothers me much either Bing,” said Sue from the side, “I haven’t killed anyone yet, unlike Kat, but I have been mentally prepared for it for a long time. A lot of demons revel in the violence, and

there were classes about how to deal with bloodlust, just as there were classes to deal with guilt. Some of them are more disturbing than the idea of killing someone..."

"How?" asked Lily.

Sue turned her gaze to Lily, fixing the Memphis with a dead stare. "I had one teacher that talked about the number of sentients on any given world we might visit, then demonstrated just how many die to all sorts of random things. She went into rather gruesome detail about all the ways someone could possibly find themselves dead... and essentially said 'so really unless you're aiming for genocide you won't make a noticeable difference on the population' and I had never felt so small. This was a class for ten year olds,"

"What the fuck?" whispered Kat. She might've been fine with killing... but to teach young demons that weren't even ten that sort of thing just felt wrong to her. Children shouldn't need to be ok with death.

In a way, it's weird demons are so cool with death considering it's probably quite rare to see a death in the hub, both due to medical skill and because old age is a rare event.

"I know I was forced to butcher a bunny when I was eight. Had to hold it down and slit its neck, Lian did it too, though we were both alone with our teacher for the experience," added Bing.

Are we the weird one's Lily? Coming from such a non-violent country?

[I mean... even just on Earth... if we're talking statistics? Yes. Yes we are the weird ones.]

Well... damn.

"You don't have to answer Bing, Lian... but have you guys killed a human?" asked Kat, her words being translated to the equivalent for 'sentient' instead of specifically 'human'.

Lian and Bing shared a look. "That bunny killing class?" Kat nodded as Bing spoke, "The graduation test was killing a convicted rapist,"

"Murderer for me," added Lian.

Cultivators are weird.

Chapter 1034 Feng and Bing Show off

Bing's perspective

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"THE ARENA HAS BEEN REPAIRED, AND THAT MEANS IT'S TIME FOR OUR SECOND SEMI-FINAL MATCH. THESE TWO NEED NO INTRODUCTION HERE AT THE HOLY WIND SECT. TODAY, YOU WILL SEE THE TWIN HEIRS FACE OFF IN A ONE ON ONE FIGHT! WILL THIS BE AN END TO THEIR SIBLING RIVALRY? I DOUBT IT, BUT IT WILL BE A MAJOR WIN FOR EITHER OF THEM. GIVE IT UP FOR, FENG AND BING," shouted the announcer.

*Bah, it's not like I actually care about the so called 'rivalry' between the two of us. Feng says he doesn't care either... but that's only so long as he's actually ahead in whatever inane thing they're comparing us with. I don't think he ever got over the time he found out he has the slower cultivation speed. Still, if he

wants the win, he can take it. If he wants to take over the sect by himself when our parents either ascend, die or just go into closed-door cultivation? He can have it.*

Bing smiled at her friends, new and old, as she walked over to the edge of the box. She started to shuffle her feet and build up air qi on the soles of her shoes. Just because she was going to mess with Feng a bit, didn't mean she was going to completely trash the opening performance. That was a one way ticket to getting a beating disguised as 'extra training'.

Really, it amazes me that our parents think we haven't noticed the difference between 'training' and training. Especially not when they still punish us normally as well. We've had plenty of time to work out the difference. Ugh whatever. I guess it's time to put on a show. The question is... how much of one?

Bing noticed Feng starting to run out towards the arena and launched herself into the air, letting the arrays in her clothing work their magic, causing her winds to glow a mixture of gold and green as she flew through the air down to the arena, spinning slowly along the way to leave a noticeable spiral trail behind her. She smirked down at Feng when he grimaced at her surprise entrance.

Not willing to let his sister get the upper hand, even in this sort of display, he stomped on the ground and launched himself up to meet her using a pillar of ice that sprung forth from the floor. She caught him by locking elbows allowing them to spin around in circles as they drifted downwards. Bing kept up her winds, while Feng released a dusting of snowflakes.

Now that Feng was more visible, she could see that he was wearing a matching outfit with the colours reversed. It looked good on him, even if she thought the boots looked a lot sillier with the blue and green flipped. The snowflake designs on them were nice at least. "This is not what we practiced sister," hissed Feng, knowing that the announcer should've turned off sound across the arena for this performance.

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"Bah, you managed to adapt, didn't you?" returned Bing with a grin as they hit the ground. In sync, they threw a weak attack at each other. A gust of snowflakes from Feng, and green wind from Bing. Bing grit her teeth; this was actually one of the harder parts of the performance. She had to make sure her wind didn't just throw the snow back into Feng's face... no matter how tempting it might be.

"Are you going to mess with me further? I'd like this performance to go off without a hitch," hissed Feng, letting his raised arms mask the movements of his mouth.

Good question. Should I keep him on his toes? It would be amusing... but any more would probably get me in trouble even if it works out. Better not. Plus, Feng wasn't the only one who had to spend hours on this stupid display, so I might as well pull it off with style. "Nope, it'll be as we planned from here," said Bing honestly.

Feng glared at her as they started to circle each other again with Feng building up ice under his shoes, and Bing sliding across the ground and up the newly forming ramps of ice. "What were you even doing in the V.I.P boxes?" asked Feng with a sneer.

"I was hanging out with my friends, something you wouldn't know anything about," snipped Bing.

"You have friends other than Lian? And they were in the Mountain Shaker Sect box? Have you turned traitor little sis?" asked Feng, with a touch of seriousness in his voice.

"I DO in fact have friends other than Lian, and at least she's willing to speak her mind when she's around me. All the little toadies that follow you around can barely manage an intelligent thought between them all. I can't decide if it's because they only have a few braincells they need to share carefully, or if their too busy... SUCKING YOUR DICK!" retorted Bing.

"That's some hostility there little sis," said Feng, trying not to let his anger show, "Even if it was a valid attack, which it isn't, I'd really rather you didn't air those sorts of thoughts where our parents could lip-read the recording afterwards. Even though it's made up, they might still give me shit for it. You as well for spreading rumours,"

"Bah, I've been hanging out with a Succubus," not going to mention it's more than one, "so apparently I have sex on the mind. I stand by it though, those little followers couldn't even make it into the tournament, and I don't know why you put up with them," answered Bing.

"Not all of us can be prodigies with a rare and unique energy type," grumbled Feng, "And what's this about a Succubus? Lian... our parents are NOT going to happy if they find out about that. Surely you know better then to cavort with demons?"

"Is it really 'cavorting' if they're just friends," Bing said as she tried really hard not to think about Sue's tits. The mental discipline from cultivating was really good in this instance... and the fact that the ice had already caused her cheeks to redden a bit meant that if there was a little more? It was easily ignored.

"Yessss..." hissed Feng, "You can't trust them for anything other than what is specified in the Contract, and even then, they can get around it if they really want. And of all the demons, it had to be a Succubus? Do you even know what you're doing?"

Well I know quite a bit more about them both, and potential weak-points of Bodeir the Mountain Shaker Sect heir. Probably more info then all of our spies have managed. Not that I plan to share that information... but I do HAVE it. Plus, it's not like I'm going to have sex with them... probably... I mean, Kat has a girlfriend, is asexual, and Sue is straight. So it's not happening. Bing ignored that tiny voice in her mind reminding her Sue was more than down to experiment regardless of how much she might prefer dick.

The twins reached the top of the ramp and flew off to the side. Feng launched a large ball of ice, supplied by his gauntlets, and Bing hit it with a large chunk of wind qi, sending it up into the sky. For this demonstration they were abusing the fact that while the shield extended upwards quite a ways, it didn't have a roof. Bing's wind carried the ice chunk upwards into the sky, where it destabilised, exploding into countless snowflakes that rained down over the audience.

Feng landed hard, letting ice explode from his boots to cover his half of the arena. Bing landed slowly a few moments later, a cloud of green wind covering her boots and whipping her hair about. She even let the ice explosion encroach on her side a fair bit. Bing found herself low on energy, and using her control over the wind to keep her cool. She was moments away from breaking out into a sweat.

*I get this was meant to be impressive, and it was for Rank 2's sure, but I'm nearly out of qi at this point. Powering all the arrays in this armour is a massive pain. If the announcer wasn't so skilled a qi

transference, we'd never be able to get away with doing this. Only the fact that we allow other contestants this chance allows us to cheat so blatantly on the displays.*

Bing was abusing her wind affinity to suck in more air with her shallow seeming breaths, filling her lungs with sweet oxygen as she held back the fatigue. *Just gotta avoid passing out until the announcer tops us both up. Then I have to decide how much of a fight I want to put up against Feng. Anywhere between 'real match' to 'performance art' is possible. I'd just need to make sure it was obvious to Feng what I'm going for. Urgh... how hard do I want to make it for Bodeir and Feng?*

Chapter 1035 Feng VS Bing

Bing

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"WHAT A SHOW FOLKS. GIVE THEM A ROUND OF APPLUASE," said the announcer, though the clapping had long since started. He shot a golden ball of qi at each of the twins and jumped away. "ARE YOU READY?!"

Not really. I still need a bit of time to properly recover from my exertions showing off. Despite having my qi topped off my body still thinks its exhausted and I'd really rather you give us more time. Despite her thoughts, Bing didn't say anything aloud. She knew there was no point. It wouldn't do to make it look like their 'little display' was strenuous in any way.

Feeling her dantain rapidly fill with qi was intoxicating, and did a lot to help calm her racing heart. She was still unhappy with the sudden start, but after jut a few moments it was looking much more acceptable. Bing had recovered well... of course the artifacts she was wearing had not. So, using them for extra bits of flare and power was out of the question.

Bing pulled her sword gently from its sheath, the soft sound of metal on leather ringing in her ears as she twirled the blade around in her hands. Feng did the same, drawing both daggers and spinning them in his hands, twirling the handles around his fingers. The show off.

"BEGIN!" shouted the announcer.

Bing's form blurred as she rushed straight at Feng, hoping he was still wasting time twirling with his knives. Bing wasn't sure if she wanted to try winning or not just yet... but Feng certainly didn't deserve the win if he fell for such a simple tactic. The wind howled as she moved, and the sword came down...

Clang! Feng caught her sword with his dagger. Bing's eyes widened as she realised it was just the single dagger. Letting go with her hand, she whipped her now free hand over around Feng's other wrist, stopping herself from getting stabbed. It wasn't enough though. Not only could she feel Feng pushing her back, slowly, her hands were already numb. Ice was spreading along her sword and her fingers were turning red.

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Bing sucked in a deep breath and let the wind explode from her lungs, pushing her away from Feng. She dashed away and sucked in more air to recover, regulating her breathing as she tried to warm up her

hands without dropping her guard. Feng seemed willing to just watch her for a few moments, but that wasn't going to last long unless he had some plan to use the break.

*Dammit. I know he's stronger than me bit really? How much qi did he burn blocking my attack with one of his dinky little knives? I can't believe that. Not parrying, not dodging, the bastard BLOCKED my sword swing. I don't know what our weapons are made of but clearly they're better than my wind. I can't just cut through them like something lesser...

So what am I going to do? I might not be able to threaten him even if I want to...* Before Bing could keep wallowing in pity, Feng dashed forward, his daggers glowing with blue light. Bing, wanting nothing to do with that, used her qi to stay away from him, dashing and floating around Feng, making sure to use the ample extra space the main arena gave them to avoid his strikes easily.

Yeah 'easily' as if this isn't burning through all of my qi like one of those overpriced carriages. I don't know how much qi Feng has in his daggers right now but I'm guessing not that much. The blue glow is more from the material and array in them than the amount of qi... probably. If I keep dodging like this I'm the one who's going to lose. Which... isn't the worst thing ever but... I don't know if I can even make him break a sweat if things keep going this way.

Bing decided to go in for a probing strike, letting her grip hang loose in one hand Bing unleashed a flurry of blows on Feng, trying to overwhelm him with speed, the one thing she knew she had on him... but to no avail. Feng might not have been as fast as Bing, but he had a lot of combat experience and was able to use minimal movements to line up one of his daggers as protection from every strike.

The one time Bing went for a kick, she nearly lost her foot in the attempt. She'd thought Feng was sufficiently distracted, but he was ready, dropping his dagger down and were it not for her speed and wind affinity Bing knew she'd been out of the match after such a blunder. She needed to use her breath technique to escape again, but Feng was ready, and managed to avoid it. He was now chasing her around the ring, keeping to the inside to save on energy.

*Dammit! He's just going to run me down! I knew that I wasn't his match in direct combat but this is ridiculous! I don't want to break out my big techniques because if I fuck one of those up I'll be out of the match! Plus I'm sure Feng has some to match me. Ugh, this was so much easier when I was set to just let him win, but now I feel like actually trying a bit... and it's really not working.

What can I do? If I whip up a tornado he'll just add frost to it. My wind blade isn't strong enough to cut his knives. I'm fast, but not fast enough when he's able to block with either blade. I can't get around behind him... probably. He's not so slow as to miss something like that unless I blind him or something... hmm... no I think his hearing is good enough to follow me decently well so that wouldn't work.

I... I guess I knew it was probably going to turn out like this. It was probably better to put in less effort. Much less risk of a heart demon that way. Of course, I was having fun with my friends, and I just had to brag that I could beat Feng 'if I got lucky' ha, even if I get lucky I still probably can't take him out. What did I think would happen? That Feng would trip on some loose rocks or something?*

Bing sucked in a big lot of air and tried to discretely shoot air darts at Feng's feet, but he managed to sidestep them all, not even stopping in his charge. *Ugh. Hmm... he did that pretty casually. Could I...? Is it possible?*

Bing started to get a crazy idea. It might not work... but it was the best idea she had. Taking a page from Lian's playbook, Bing started to form up wind darts in her throat... but coated them in an extra thick layer of qi so that they wouldn't just pop on contact with the ground. She spat them out one after another, burning through her precious qi reserves but setting up a deadly minefield.

It didn't seem like Feng had noticed anything weird as she kept sending the wind 'bullets' at Feng's legs as she ran around. "You're going to exhaust yourself sister!" taunted Feng. Bing just glared in response, not able to respond with condensed wind qi in her throat. She kept firing, ball of air after ball of air until the moment arrived. Feng was just about to step on one... her whole body tensed, she readied her sword and then...

Feng stepped around it. Awkwardly yes, but clearly dodging the mines. Bing's eyes widened, she'd already partially committed. Her qi was running low, and she was turning. It would take more qi than she could afford to turn herself around and not get caught by the knives... so she had to try.

Bing charged in, trying to think of a way to still use her mines, and hit on an idea. Just as she reached Bing, she spat out another glob of air qi, just a thin slice to pop the mine and slice into Feng's side. She reached him just a moment before the mine would explode and swung down.

With one arm, Feng blocked her... and with his foot he summoned a wall of ice. The mine exploded, shattering the ice but losing its power as the ice washed against Feng mostly harmlessly. Bing's expression crumbled and she let the attack come. Feng's dagger paused, a hair's width from her neck. "Surrender?" he asked

*I should keep fighting just to spite him. He doesn't have enough space to get the power to cut my skin but... * "I surrender..." said Bing with annoyance.

"You nearly had my sister," said Feng with a grin, as Bing collapsed to her knees.

"Bah, you saw right through me," said Bing grumbling.

"Nope. I wasn't paying enough attention, I thought you were panicking. I only noticed that something was wrong when you tensed up. I didn't know about the mines at all, I just guessed there was something wrong with the spot after you looked like I was about to offer you my ice cream serving at dinner," explained Feng.

Bing grimaced. *DAMMIT*

Chapter 1036 After Match Woes

Back to Kat

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Bing collapsed back into her seat nearby, tired and displeased with herself. "Well, that was pointless," grumbled Bing.

"Hey... you put on a good show," said Sue, "You didn't think you could win, but you went out there and tried. That has to count for something right?"

Bing let out a long breath of air, "I'm not sure it does. I... I feel like I gave up too early. I mean, Feng could've taken my head off after that mistake. He might have if he wasn't my brother... and I'm the one that fucked it up in the end. I don't know those mines would've done enough damage to take him out of the fight..."

"But if I'd just got his legs? Slowed him down a bunch then hammered on that side I might have been able to win? But I failed the first lesson of real combat. Don't telegraph your attacks! It's something you practically teach babies! I can't believe I gave myself away like that!"

"Have you considered that Feng was just trying to annoy you by making it seem like he didn't know the whole time?" suggested Lian. "He knows you pretty well, I'm sure he could see you beating yourself up about it just like you are now. It might be his way of getting back at you for messing with the performance?"

Bing shook her head and said, "Nah. Feng doesn't have a subtle bone in his body. If he wanted to punish me for it, he'd just steel my desert or maybe my snacks. He might even leave a note bragging about it. If he's feeling particularly creative he might come up with a new round of insults to share with his 'friends' but honestly? I don't think he could be bothered for something this small. Well, he might take some of my snacks, but not all of them, just what he can eat then and there,"

"That's... oddly specific," said Kat.

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"Eh, he's done it before. Take a few things from my hidden snack cupboard and leave the rest... and he's raided the whole thing with his friends a few times," replied Bing.

"Couldn't you... move it? It's not very hidden if your brother knows where to find it right?" asked Kat.

Bing gave of a small laugh, tinged with a slight amount of pain, "Eh, it's more of a relic from our childhood. With our spatial rings to store things in... if we really want to keep our snacks safe it's better to just use them. The 'secret snack cupboard' idea is one we both came up with as kids. It seemed like such a good idea at the time, we could hide all of our snacks from our parents to avoid getting in trouble for snacking when we weren't supposed to..."

"It um... didn't really work out all that well. Obviously the maids 'helped' us set the whole thing up so they told our parents straight away what we'd done, and we'd always be 'caught' when we took things out of the snack cupboard but for a long time we thought somehow we'd been seen eating, not that our parents had placed an array on the cupboard to record who took out what and when..."

"So that was a failure... but I still liked the idea... until Feng started to take MY snacks from the cupboard instead of his snacks, and it was this whole big fight that resulted in us making separate snack cupboards hidden from each other. What really hurts though, even now somewhat, is that Feng managed to get one of the maids to tell him where MY cupboard was by pretending I'd moved the SHARED cupboard without telling him, which wasn't true, that cupboard was still there..."

"Anyway, I just... I sort of see it as the first real betrayal of Feng and the breakdown of our super close relationship. Before that day we were practically inseparable. We did everything together and only branched out from each other in minor ways. It sounds a bit silly now... but it meant a lot at the time,

and he just sees it now as an old relic I barely use, and a bit of petty theft... I see it as re-opening an old wound,”

“Sounds like a long time to hold a grudge,” said Sue, “Surely that’s exhausting?”

Bing shrugged, “It’s not like I’m particularly bitter about it anymore. We were kids, and there wasn’t any real malice behind it. I’m sure the first time Feng just thought it would be funny... and I don’t like... detest Feng for doing this. As much as I might complain and whinge that this ordeal is what broke our relationship down we’re still close as siblings... but we’re not joined at the hip anymore... and I can’t decide if I like it better this way or not,”

“We all have to grow up sometimes,” said Lian. “Though I still insist you should talk about this a bit more seriously with Feng one day. You never mention it. It’s like... the one you won’t let go. You’ve whined and complained about plenty of his other ‘pranks’ and gotten angry about plenty as well. The snack cupboard just makes you sad,”

“Yeah well... at least it isn’t a heart demon?” offered Bing with a wince.

Lian summoned up a black ball and hurled it at Bing’s head. She didn’t dodge, it was just Lian after all. The ball bounced on Bing’s head before spinning into a hand, that Lian had tied to her own, letting her slap Bing across the cheek. “Ow?” said Bing rubbing her face. It didn’t really hurt, but it was surprisingly, and a little tingly. “Was that even worth the qi?”

“Not at all,” announced Lian with a grin. “It was horrendously expensive for the effect, but for your attitude I think it was warranted, I just couldn’t be bothered to get up. Talking so casually about heart demons... it could have become a serious issue you know? Tempting the heavens like this is a sure-fire way of getting your ass handed to you at some point. Honestly, the only reason it ISN’T a heart demon when it means so much to you, is because it happened before you started cultivating,”

Bing winced but notable didn’t contradict any of Lian’s points. It WAS tempting the heavens to smite you speaking that way. Even still, that didn’t stop the fact that the issue felt like an old wound, scarred over but one that Feng just had to pick at occasionally, bringing up the memory of when it was made. Even if the pain was but a faded memory of that day she cried for hours... it still hurt.

“Welp, this has been depressing, anyone want to hop to a different topic?” said Bing.

“Bing, you started this conversation depressing and were definitely in the driver’s seat for most of the past five minutes. I’m not saying you don’t have a good reason for it... but you are, in large part, responsible for how depressing this conversation has been,” said Lian.

“Eh... but I just lost to my horrible brother? As my friend isn’t it your duty to comfort me in these trying times?” asked Bing.

“Nope. As your best friend it is instead my duty to tell you you’re being an idiot. Just get to Rank 3 first and then beat the stuffing out of Feng. He’s better than you at combat... but not THAT much better,” said Lian.

“Huh... yeah I suppose that makes sense,” mumbled Bing. “Not something I can do quickly... but if I could get it done a year or two before Feng catches up I can hold that over his head for the next century. I’ll take my cultivation a bit more seriously I suppose. For VENGEANCE!” said Bing with a grin.

“Do you really think you can step up your cultivation?” asked Kat.

“Oh yeah, definitely,” said Bing. “Not like... a major amount. I already cultivate about as efficiently as I can... but if you’re willing to put in the hard work, you can go for speed over efficiency without sacrificing your foundation. I’ll just have to take a bit more of an active effort in consolidating my gains and well, taking in the right kind of energy,”

“Should we talk about how well you did in your last match Bing?” asked Sue. “We’ve done it for everyone else but well...”

Bing shook her head, “Yeah, no. I’d really rather we didn’t thanks. I know very well what my major mistake was. Plus, I’m sure to get it all pointed out to me by my parents in excruciating detail for the next month or two. So I’d really just rather not dwell on it for much longer. It was a match I could’ve won if I didn’t give the game away, but Feng was always going to be a tough challenge,”

“Well, who is your money on for the final match?” asked Kat.

“I’m not sure...” said Bing slowly as she thought about it. “I think... normally Feng would win, by a small margin, but with the extra time Bodeir has had since his match, and the fact Bodeir didn’t need to fight Lian he might edge it out...”

Chapter 1037 THE GRAND FINALE (Part 1?)

Bodeir and Feng walked slowly up the stairs to the arena, taking some care to match paces with each other. The announcer in the background was shouting once again. “THE GRAND FINAL IS HERE LADIES AND GENTLEMAN. BODEIR, THE MOUNTAIN SHAKER SECT HEIR, VERSUS, FENG, ONE OF THE TWIN HEIRS OF THE HOLY ICY WIND SECT. THERE IS NO NEED FOR THEATRICALS THIS TIME. OUR COMPETITORS HAVE SHOWN THEIR METAL. NOW THERE IS JUST THE MATTER OF PROVING THEMSELVES TO BE THE BEST!”

Bodeir and Feng faced off against each other. The announcer threw a gold orb to both of them, making sure to top them both up with qi. Feng seemed to breathe easier after the infusion of spirit, but Bodeir hardly reacted, simply giving the announcer a slight nod. “DO OUR COMPETITORS HAVE ANY WORDS THEY’D LIKE TO SHARE BEFORE THE FINAL FIGHT?”

Bodeir shook his head, and Feng, seeing that, shook his head as well. “I SEE WE’VE GOT TWO MEN THAT WOULD RATHER SPEAK WITH THEIR FISTS! EXCELLENT. WITH THAT DECISION, I DO SO DECLARE THE FINAL MATCH... BEGUN!”

Both fighters reacted instantly. Feng charged forward, daggers glowing a bright blue while Bodeir remained in place, but he summoned up a coating of stone from the floor. This caused Feng to stall in place, just out of Bodeir’s range. If Bodeir was going to ‘waste’ qi on armour that wasn’t necessary at that moment, Feng wasn’t going to stop him. He would happily take the qi advantage.

Bodeir, seeing this charge stop, simply dropped into a meditation pose. Right there, on the ground, baiting Feng to charge in. Feng wasn’t willing to take the bait in this case, and sheathed his daggers, sitting down opposite Bodeir and mimicking his pose. Feng was doing just that, mimicking his opponent, he was still keeping his focus trained on Bodeir and wasn’t risking himself by taking in larger amounts of qi... but he was technically gaining qi, slowly.

Bodeir on the other hand, actually was meditating. He was taking in as much qi as he could while remaining unnoticed and channelling that qi into the ground below him. Suffusing it with his power. For the audience, especially those unattuned to qi, this turned into a very boring five minutes. Bodeir kept his trick up, and Feng was too busy watching for Bodeir attacking. The constant flow of qi to the rock armour covering Bodeir was also a good way to disguise the fact that a lot of the qi was being dispersed.

Things finally happened when Bodeir's qi had infused the rock all the way up to Feng himself, where it became blindingly obvious what Bodeir had been doing. Feng's eyes widened as he launched himself towards Bodeir, flinging himself feet first with his arms towards Bodeir's face. It was a rushed move on his part, but he wanted to do everything he could to interrupt Bodeir as fast as possible.

In this case it paid off. Just as Feng had been too focused on watching with his eyes, Bodeir, by necessity, was focused on channelling his qi. He didn't react until Feng's boots smacked into his face, sending Bodeir's head rocking backwards and disrupting his concentration. The abundance of qi tried to escape, but Bodeir was able to channel it instead into his rock armour, causing it to explode off of him, forcing the two contestants apart.

Bodeir groaned as he stood up. The explosion hadn't been kind to him either, and he'd just been struck in the forehead. He was lucky to have such a hard head, and Feng hadn't struck any of the softer areas of Bodeir's skull. That being said, the rock had exploded into pieces on his body, and it was pockmarked with bruises. For Bodeir, it was a minor thing and he just sped up his healing a bit to remove the pain entirely. He was full on qi, and for bruises this was a minor concession.

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Feng wasn't quite so lucky. His legs had been over Bodeir's body, as his feet and boots had pushed Bodeir's head back. This meant that while some of the rocks had been stopped by the boots, there were quite a few that had lodged themselves into Feng's flesh a bit above his boots. Feng winced, but didn't think he had the time to reach down and pull them out. So instead, he had to focus on healing, with the rocks still there. It took a lot more qi to push them out as part of the healing, but he thought the risk worth it. He wasn't so far from Bodeir he could afford dropping his guard like that.

Feng pulled his knives out and charged, not willing to give Bodeir time to take over the arena completely. It was clear, that Bodeir was willing to play the extremely long game in this case, so Feng decided he'd need to make the first move. Bodeir had lost control of much of the qi in the arena floor, but he was quickly reconnecting with it. He had only lost it for a moment, and with a flex of his will the connection burned to life again.

Feng reached Bodeir and went straight for his neck, trying to slice into it with his left blade. Bodeir let the attack come, ignoring the pain as the dagger pierced his rocky armour and a little bit of his skin. He continued to ignore the chilling feeling Feng's qi was driving into the wound as he slammed a rocky fist into Feng's stomach in retaliation. Feng attempted to parry it with his dagger, but the small metal blade was simply pushed aside by the power. Bodeir's fist crashed into Feng's ribs, and the ice cultivator let himself be pushed backwards, rather than standing up to such power.

Feng grimaced, as the rock armour around Bodeir's neck closed and then slowly started to increase in thickness. On Bodeir's end, he was trying to ignore the steady drip of blood, and push qi into the wound

to offset the ice qi that was already causing the first signs of frostbite around the wound. It wouldn't do a cultivator much harm, not so little, but Bodeir was willing to spend a bit of extra qi on a neck wound.

Feng snarled as he charged in for another attack. Bodeir met him happily. Feng danced around Bodeir as best he could, taking example from his sister. He wasn't as fast as she was... but he was much faster than a Bodeir covered in rocks. His daggers didn't have time to dig in properly, but they were leaving patches of frost with every scratch. Bodeir was making weak attempts and brushing Feng off, but not trying all that hard. Just enough to force him to keep away.

Bodeir twisted his foot in place as he flicked a rock bullet at Feng. Feng twisted out of the way... stepping onto the churning earth Bodeir was controlling. Bodeir's leg twisted further, as the stone churned and tried to suck in Feng's foot. Feng blasted ice from his soles, forcing his foot upwards, but not perfectly. He'd had to use a good deal of force and Bodeir was ready. He slid forward on the stone, and his fist zeroed in on Feng's face.

Feng, panicking from his mistake, had no choice but to try something dumb. He hadn't properly practiced this technique... but it would have to work. He gathered half of his qi into his throat and let loose a hail of ice from his mouth. Bodeir's fist iced over, even as it slammed home on Feng's cheek, though much of its power was lost. Feng stumbled backwards, but Bodeir wasn't able to follow up. His right side was frosted over, the ice holding him to the floor.

The announcer watched closely, ready to call the match if Bodeir was unable to move. Cracks started forming through the ice, and Feng decided to go for broke. A wave of ice exploded from his mouth as he funnelled more and more qi into the technique. Bodeir considered dodging by shifting the earth under his feet with the ice included, but decided it wasn't worth the qi.

Ice formed all around Bodeir, layer upon layer building up, mostly on Bodeir's front until he was completely trapped within an ice crystal. Feng was stumbling back and rubbing his throat in pain. His throat was burning and his neck was cold to the touch. He'd used too much ice qi at once, and his body wasn't ready for it. He was already shivering. Feng didn't know if he'd won yet... so he collapsed into the floor and started to suck in qi greedily, recharging as much as he could with the time allowed.

"IS THIS THE END FOR BODEIR? IF HE CANNOT ESCAPE IN TEN SECONDS THE MATCH WILL BE CALLED IN HEIR FENG'S FAVOUR!" shouted the announcer. "ONE"

No movement from Bodeir.

"TWO... THREE... FOUR... FIVE..."

The ice started shaking, Bodeir was clearly still awake and fighting. Would it be enough?

"SIX... SEVEN..."

The ice started to crack, and the shaking grew more intense.

"EIGHT... NINE..."

Chapter 1038 THE GRAND GRAND FINALE

"EIGHT... NINE..." the announcer shouted as the cracking spread throughout the entire ice cube. Bodeir was just moments away from freedom... but he only had ONE moment left.

“TEN!” shouted the announcer at the exact time as Bodeir exploded out of the ice. His rock armour intact, but his breath frosty. Much of Bodeir’s body heat had been leeched away by the ice, but his qi was keeping him functional for now, so he exploded into movement...

When the announcer hopped down in between the two fighters, “Hold it! Just... just one moment,” Bodeir skidded, trying to stop but running into the announcer’s outstretched palm. The announcer didn’t mind it, simply blurring in place for most, and depositing Bodeir back where he had been when the announcer had called for a halt. “I am afraid I do not know what the rules require of me here. Please wait just a moment, and then the match can resume, or Bodeir will be declared the loser due to immobility,”

With that the announcer dashed back up to his podium, and Kat watched as he spoke with a nearby woman in cultivator robes who took off running. The announcer nodded and then turned his gaze on both fighters in the arena, as if daring one of them to try something. Bodeir growled but didn’t move, while Feng stayed sprawled out on the floor.

Bodeir let himself breathe deeply, using this as a chance to recover his qi as he knew Feng would be doing the same. Currently, this pause actually favoured him, at least, Bodeir believed it did. While it had taken a good chunk of qi to escape from the ice, it was not as costly as it had been for Feng to freeze him. In the battle of reserves, Bodeir was sure he had more, both percentage wise and overall quantity. Due to the nature of qi, this meant, he would be getting more qi from this break than Feng. It wasn’t ideal... but he realised he’d taken too long to free himself. It was hard to hear properly in ice after all.

Feng on the other hand was even more grateful for the interruption. Despite his qi being lower than Bodeir’s, it was clear to Feng that he wasn’t winning the current engagement. Taking a break, reevaluating things, and gather what qi he could get his hands on, could only be a good thing. Feng was certain he had been just moments away from losing before the announcer had called for a break. It wasn’t ideal, but for him it was a win. Now he just had to turn this whole match into a win.

In the stands though... things were a different matter. Many people grumbled in discontent. This was the final round. The deciding match... and it was potentially coming down to a technicality. Despite many understanding why the announcer put a pause to the match, it was simply unsatisfying. It left a bitter taste in the mouths of many. Only those who had major amounts of currency wagered on the outcome were in any way happy with the decision to pause the match. Unlike the rest of the crowd, they would be quite put out if they lost their money because the announcer ruled incorrectly. Though... there was much debate about who was winning in the moments before the pause. Some believed that Bodeir’s near elimination meant it was basically his loss... others argued that Feng was unprepared for Bodeir’s counterattack.

And Kat... well... Kat had some questions. *Did this happen just to give Feng a chance to recover without making it seem like they were rigging the match? If the problems the Holy Icy Wind Sect have with the Mountain Shaker Sect are real, then perhaps they wanted to avert Feng’s loss?*

[I dunno Kat. You might just be seeing malice where there is none. I’m not sure this is really benefiting Feng all that much. Not when Bodeir can gather up more qi in however long this takes. We can ask Bing if you’re that worried.]

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I suppose. I just don't know if I want to voice my thoughts to her about it. Bing is really nice, and we've become good friends. Pointing out that her sect might not be as nice as she thinks they are... I don't know if I want to do that to her.

[Kat. Not only is Bing training to be sect heir and surely knows that it isn't all sunshine and roses in her sect... if she's really our friend? We need to TELL HER that something isn't right.]

Ah... yeah, I guess you're correct Lily. I'm just worried about alienating one of Sue's new friends. She seems to really need them. "Hey Bing... is this normal? This sort of pause I mean?" asked Kat.

Bing frowned down at the arena and said, "I'm... I'm not sure? I don't think it's something that's happened in my lifetime. Though... I must confess I also do not know if our rules state that as soon as 10 is called the competitor is considered restrained, or if you have that final second to break free as well..."

As soon as Bing said that the announcer's aide returned and whispered into his ear. "A VERDICT HAS BEEN REACHED. THE MATCH WILL CONTINUE! DO EITHER OF THE CONTESTANTS HAVE ANY COMPLAINTS?" both contestants shook their heads in sync. "GOOD. IN THAT CASE, LET THE COMBAT CONTINUE!"

Feng was ready for the start and instantly got back up to his feet. Bodeir, having had enough playing passive, was moving forward even as Feng was still getting to his feet. Bodeir slid along the earth and slammed a fist into Feng, even as Feng blocked with his daggers crossed over the fist, letting himself fly backwards. Bodeir didn't let up, charging forward after Feng's retreating figure.

Punch after punch, Feng simply rolled with it, trying to conserve qi while Bodeir was wasting it. That was, until a punch sent Feng dangerously close to the edge. Feng knew he couldn't be cast out of the ring... but being pummelled into the shield protecting the spectators would be much, much worse. He tried to dash away to the side, but Bodeir was ready. Relying on his earth movement technique, he changed directions instantly and managed to catch Feng's shoe.

Feng didn't hesitate, even as Bodeir was reeling him in, Feng flexed the muscles in his feet, managing to just barely, and awkwardly, slip his foot out of his shoe and escape. Bodeir hurled the shoe into the corner of the arena and slammed his foot into the ground. Spikes of earth jutting up around Feng's feet, as the ice cultivator danced around them, making sure not to let his newly exposed foot get impaled. The stone wasn't too sharp, and his boots were good... but down a boot? The floor was now a much scarier place.

Feng sucked in a breath, and grit his teeth. He was exposed, he couldn't run, not when Bodeir clearly had enough qi to finish him off. So he leapt at his opponent, getting in as low as he could, giving himself barely any room to swing his daggers and pouring qi into the shining blades. Feng exploded into movement, slashing in as many places as he could. He moved around Bodeir, dodging knees and elbows as Bodeir tried to get him off, but nothing was working.

Bodeir didn't let it worry him, simply detonating his armour again, forcing Feng away... but Feng was ready for it this time. He froze his feet in place and guarded his most sensitive organs with his daggers... one above for his eyes, and one below for something else. The moment the rocks bounced off his daggers, Feng moved again, unconcerned with the numerous injuries he had taken.

Blood trailing off him, Feng stabbed into Bodeir's leg and arm, then ripped the daggers downwards drawing as much blood as he possibly could. Bodeir's limbs began to freeze, but he wasn't out just yet. The pain was nearly blinding, and Bodeir could feel the frosty chill making its way into his bones. It felt like his qi was starting to freeze as well, and the air in his lungs started condensing into a liquid. That might've just been the blood though...

Taking all but the last dregs of his qi, Bodeir empowered his forehead and slammed it down into the back of Feng's own. Feng, having spent all of his qi in this last desperate attack, collapsed onto the ground, bleeding profusely from a grand number of wounds, daggers falling from his hands. Bodeir stumbled, the dagger in his leg remaining there, while the dagger in his arm fell to the ground. Bodeir was able to remain standing just long enough to hear, "AND THE WINNER IS!" before he too, fell to the ground, unconscious.

Chapter 1039 A Final Tournament Day Chat

"AND THE WINNER IS BODEIR! GIVE HIM A ROUND OF APPLAUSE, AND MEDICAL GET TO WORK!" shouted the announcer. Two medical teams, one from either side of the arena ran out and grabbed their respective charges before heading back out of the arena. "WE WILL BE HAVING A SMALL AWARD CEREMONY ONCE OUR FINALISTS ARE SUFFICIENTLY RECOVERED. YOU ARE ALL WELCOMED TO STAY, BUT THAT IS THE END OF THE FIGHTING. Those of you choosing to exit, please move in an orderly fashion. Those with flying swords, or other transport artifacts should know they are strictly banned within the stadium furthermore..."

Kat started tuning out the announcer. She was sticking around so it didn't really matter. "Hoooo, what a final fight. The interruption was a bit weird... but that was cool. Do you think Bodeir did a good job?" asked Kat.

"I think he did excellently," said Lian, "It was great to see Feng beaten so handily!"

"Bah, while I agree Bodeir did well, even if that play with the ice was a bit risky, I'm more concerned with my brother's poor performance. Perhaps I rattled him? Eh, I doubt it. Still, on his side of things, his showing was pathetic. He should know better when it comes to Mountain Shaker Sect members. Bodeir is THE HEIR for crying out loud," grumbled Bing.

"What else could he have done?" asked Sue.

"Well the biggest thing that I can think of is the fact that he didn't use any other weapons," said Bing.

"But daggers are his main weapon right?" asked Lily.

"Yes they are," said Bing with a nod, "but Feng is a talented fighter. He knows plenty of other weapons and his storage ring should be full of other weapons. They aren't anywhere near as good as his daggers, and his skill with them aren't that high... but even if Feng had just picked one of his old short swords from when he wasn't as tall and used them like daggers. Really ANYTHING would be better than two short daggers for getting through that rocky armour. Honestly I don't know what he was thinking,"

"Oh" said Lily.

.....

"Oh indeed," said Bing with a sigh. "He's a bit of a hothead... so he might not have been thinking about it, and fights go by fast... but he really should've thought of it during the intermission or before the match started. It's not like he doesn't know who Bodeir is!"

"Would his backup weapons be good enough though?" asked Lian. "A lot of the other weapons Feng has are just for training. Just as an example, his old backup spear, didn't that break on an ice-troll hunt a few months ago? Did he ever get that replaced?"

Bing winced, "Yeah... I remember that. Hmm... I just assumed our parents would have provided replacements. It's not like that weapon broke because he was stupid with it. The spear was just getting old, and the shaft snapped, leaving the head buried in troll blood and guts for too long ruining the array work and damaging the metal,"

"I don't really know anything about how your parents decide you guys deserve new weapons and whatnot," said Lian with a shrug.

"No... that's fair... but I just thought they'd have replacements for Feng you know? He's broken plenty of weapons before, and only that time he broke a sword trying to cut through a giant boulder did it take a while for him to get a replacement. We were taught to care for our weapons, but to replace them if necessary. So the fact Feng doesn't have any replacements... is a bit strange, but I suppose it's not as easy to replace a basic sword for a Rank 1, as it is to replace a spear fit for a Rank 2," said Bing with a nod.

"Well, how would you rate Feng's performance otherwise?" asked Kat.

"Hmm... he did quite well improvising that ice breath move. I'm sure he stole it from me. I'm sure he practiced it at least somewhat before now, but he was forced into using it to slow Bodeir down. Honestly, if he had that move perfected I think he could take out Bodeir with it. If Bodeir was too cocky, just freeze Bodeir to the spot and then keep piling the ice on afterwards,"

"And Feng didn't do that then because?" asked Sue.

"Because he was about to pass out, duh," snipped Lian. "If Feng passed out from qi exhaustion before the ten seconds of 'restraint' necessary for Bodeir to loose, then Feng would be second place. It wouldn't even matter if Bodeir failed to free himself. As long as he could prove he was still awake and active while in the ice he would be the winner, and even if he didn't manage that, the match would likely just end in a tie. Feng HAD to stop himself from collapsing. He... partially managed that at least,"

The room descended into silence after that. There wasn't really much else to say about Feng's performance. At least, not that the girls could see. They didn't know enough about dagger use to point out more specific flaws, and the big ones were really obvious once you realised they were there at all. For Bodeir... it didn't feel right to criticise him, especially not in the nit-picky way they normally would after he'd just won the whole damn thing. That's why Sue asked, "So what are y'all doing tomorrow?"

"Um..." Lian shrugged and glanced at Bing, who shrugged as well.

Kat and Lily looked at each other, before Kat said, "When exactly is the boat leaving? We're still in charge of Bodeir's safety till then. If it's not till later tomorrow... then that's what we'll both be doing,"

"I've been chatting with some of the servants and they said that Bodeir was likely to leave late tonight, or early tomorrow," said Sue. "So we probably won't be too busy, and we'll almost certainly be free after lunchtime."

Kat and Lily shared a shrug this time, so Sue clapped her hands together, "In that case we should arrange a place to meet up! Maybe have Bing or Lian play guide for a bit," Sue could see Lily's slight frown, but Sue waved her off, "Oh you can still have your date the day after, or the day after that, don't you worry your pretty little head Lily."

Lily immediately flushed red and started sputtering, "That... I wasn't thinking that... we can meet up... it sounds fun..."

"You're not demon enough to be forced to tell the truth Lily... but your face gives it all away so I don't know why you even bothered trying," said Sue while suppressing her laughter.

"I'm down," said Bing cheerily, "It's probably better you won't be available in the early morning, I'll need to do a bit of meditating first. I can't let myself get too far behind on my cultivation so spending that time cultivating properly should do me a bit of good. What about you Lian? You up to it?"

Lian shrugged, "Eh, I don't mind. A girl's day out might be nice, but it's not something I really care about. I'll show up if you do though,"

"Excellent," cheered Sue.

"Question," said Lily. When she saw she had the others' attention she continued, "What is the difference between recharging your qi and cultivating?"

"Lian do you want too..." offered Bing with a wave of her hands.

Lian rolled her eyes but nodded, "Sure, it's pretty simple. Think of qi like money, and cultivation like long term investments, and attacks like... buying candy or something. You take in qi, the money, and then you spend it on a long term investment, like building or upgrading your house, cultivating, but sometimes its worth buying candy to motivate you... or something like that. Er... and when you have a house, you can store more money then just keeping it in a wallet or something. So you keep upgrading you house, because you live there, and you can store more stuff. Does that make sense?"

"Right..." mumbled Lily. "Does it take extra effort, cultivating?"

Lian nodded, "Yes, I suppose, if we keep using my example, it's more like you're using qi to buy building supplies that you then use to upgrade your house then just paying to have the house built. Though, some of the best cultivation techniques do actually have a system for automatically 'building your house' so it's still fairly correct,"

Chapter 1040 Award Ceremony!

Bing was called away shortly after that, to get ready for the award ceremony. Lily pressed Lian on a few more of the specifics of cultivation, but those were all extra details that non-cultivators didn't really need to know. The details were part superstition, and part biology lesson. Of course, superstition in a world where magic existed and your cultivation could be influenced by self-hatred or regret, those superstitions might actually be important parts of the cultivation doctrine.

Eventually, the announcer came back, "Let us all give the top four finishers a warm welcome!"

From the wings, first walked up Voldar and Bing. Voldar was wearing a light shirt and loose pants, and waving to the crowd. His weapon was nowhere in sight, but the ring on his finger glinted in the afternoon sun and almost certainly contained his trusty hammer. Bing skipped behind him, making a bit more of a show about it, moving around, and waving to the crowd, letting forth bursts of air as she did so, smiling brightly, though perhaps a tad forced.

Then, from the other wings, Bodeir and Feng came from the other side, Bodeir was marching forward without glancing at the crowd, but every step he left summoned up a statue of a mountain elf waving, though to save on energy they weren't particularly detailed but the crowd roared in appreciation. Feng, apparently not one to bring the mood down despite the flat expression on his face skated around these statues performing a few minor pieces of acrobatics and showing off for the crowd.

When the contestants reached the centre, they arranged themselves in the way that had been previously arranged. Bodeir ended up in the centre, with Feng to his left, with Bing on Bodeir's right, and Voldar to the left of Bodeir. The ground beneath them shook slightly, and Bing whispered something to Bodeir with a cheeky grin as the ground started to move. The ground beneath all four contestant's feet started to rise, taking them up to about the middle of the stands and stopping. Bodeir stood at the top, clearly denoting his first-place finish, with Feng just a head below him. About a metre below that stood both Bing and Voldar on the same level.

Then, with what seemed like remarkably little fanfare, a figure shot across the sky and started to come down from the air slowly, medals made of jade hanging from her hands. They had a hole cut in the centre with a precious medal for their place, one with gold, one with silver, and two with bronze. The figure was quite clearly a woman now, with short black hair and a simple outfit. She floated down to the contestants, and started to speak, "Hello, winners of our little tournament. I'm pleased to see my children amongst the winners, though I can't say I'm disappointed in any of you. It was a wonderful display of what Rank 2 cultivators can do, and I'm happy to award you with these jades..."

The woman handed off the jewels, starting with the two third place winners, and working her way up, until gently putting the jade around Bodeir's neck and stepping back, though Bing did sneak in a kiss when the woman got to her "... these jades will impart upon you all the recordings of your respective fights. In addition to that, once the ceremony is over, I will have you all follow me to have a chance to pick out your real prizes, congratulations on a wonderful performance,"

There was much clapping and cheering, but it wasn't long before the platforms holding the performers started to lower themselves. The woman summoned up a gold sigil on the ground and gestured for the group to follow through, each stepped forward proudly, displaying the medals on their chests with the woman leading up the rear. *Well. That was... a bit lacklustre for a reward ceremony. I mean, the rising stone was nice, but it was all a bit simple otherwise.*

[What are you talking about Kat? It was very impressive to my eyes.]

.....

Huh?

[The massive wind dragons? The steps made of condensed air? The way she summoned those jades from within a glowing portal? That was all pretty cool wasn't it?]

Lily I didn't see any of that.

[Huh... weird. She must have been using illusions then. I suppose that makes sense. Still quite impressive.]

Does it make sense though? Kat couldn't suppress a foreboding feeling that was rising within. Her. "Lian... what kind of cultivator is Bing's mother?" asked Kat.

"Meng? She's a wind cultivator like Bing why?" asked Lian, confused.

"Would you say she's good at illusions?" asked Kat, not answering just yet.

"I mean... as good as anyone at her level is I suppose? Not horrible, but nothing major why?" asked Lian, growing concern.

Kat bit her lip, "One final question... how similar do Meng and Bing look?" asked Kat warily.

"Oh? Well not that much alike," Kat breathed a sigh of relief... "Meng has blonde hair, and was hailed as 'the golden child' for her beautiful looks growing up. She has the same nose as Feng, but that's it, their father, Bang apparently has strong genes. Bing looks more like her grandmother on Bang's side of the family apparently,"

Kat's mood crashed, and worry burned throughout her mind. Lily looked with growing horror as she managed to bring up Kat's memories of the event. "Oh no..." whispered Lily.

"Lian... THAT WASN'T MENG!" hissed Kat, "It was some black haired woman I've never seen before! She was using an illusion across the stadium!"

Lian's eyebrows shot up, "WHAT! Then where are the contestants going!"

"I don't know!" said Kat through clenched teeth as she tried to feel the Contract she had going. It was still active clearly... and it wasn't pushing her just yet so Bodeir wasn't in immediate danger... but that was sure to change and she didn't have a good idea of where the bastard was. Not to mention their new friend Bing who... might be safe? *If someone is impersonating her mother... I don't know if they'd break cover for this, or NEED to break cover for this. Shit.* "I need some way to find them... they could all be in great danger," said Kat.

Lian eyed Kat warily, "Um... look... not that we haven't had a nice time... but why should I trust you? I've known Meng for a long time... and I... I mean I trust her!"

"Yes but I'm saying that wasn't Meng!" insisted Kat, "So we need to find them, and fast, do you have a way?"

"N-no, and I wouldn't hand that sort of thing over anyway. I don't really know you and you're a demon, just because you've said you're here to protect Bodeir doesn't mean it's the only thing you're here for. I can't risk it," said Lian as she summoned her zither and raised her hands.

Kat's eye twitched as she glared at Lian, until Sue piped up, "She's lying, she must have a tracker. Bing said she was tracked in countless ways because of how bad she is with directions. Either Lian has a tracker, or she knows someone who does," Sue paused, standing slowly and walking over to Lian, then kneeling at her chair. "Please Lian, Bing is... perhaps it's a bit early to say she's a friend but I DO care. We NEED to track them all. She could be in just as much danger as Bodeir,"

Lian's hands shook over the zither, her expression betraying her concerns. Even as she tried to steel her resolve, Sue seemed to be genuine in this... and the whispers of 'what if, what if, what if they're telling the truth?' rattled around her mind. She had never heard of the curse that forced demons to tell the truth... but as a curse master herself, it might be possible to confirm... if she thought to ask. "Please, Lian," whispered Sue, pushing all of her sincerity into her tone and posture.

Lian's hands wobbled for a second longer before they slammed down onto the instrument. Lian had tears in her eyes, overwhelmed by emotion as she let her instrument, her weapon, return to her storage ring. "I... I don't know if you're telling the truth... if you really mean that... but... but the butler outside of the door. He... he should have a tracker,"

Sue nodded, "Thank you." With that, Sue strode over to the door, throwing it open and checking the hallway... the empty hallway. "SHIT, Kat the butler is gone!" Lian reacted instantly, she bolted up over to Sue, uncaring of the proximity she had to go into to pass Kat, and fearing the worst now. She slammed herself into Sue's back and peered around the corner... to see an empty corridor.

"No... no-no-no" whispered Lian in horror as she dashed down the hallway until the corner and looked down it, to no avail. Kat sprinted down the other one, before turning and shaking her head, nobody was there.

"I..." Lian started, and then stopped, taking a deep, shaky breath as tears started to fall, "I... I have a way to track Bing still... but... but I literally cannot give it to you... I... it's a curse that tells me where she is... I... I need to go with you... and... and I'll help if you promise to save Bing too!"

Kat smiled, "Of course. I'll even help at Feng if necessary!" Kat finished with a grin that she had to force, but one that she meant.