

DEMONS 1011

Chapter 1011 A Quiet Reveal

"I'd recommend it," *even if Lily is my girlfriend first and familiar second.* "having someone to share your life with is awesome, even if it's just for emotional support. Honestly, I'm pretty sure Lily here is smart then me," said Kat honestly, if a bit misleadingly.

[While I appreciate the compliment, is it really fair to talk Bing into this without her also knowing I'm a person?]

Look I don't know. I think it's still a good idea but I'll admit you have a point. Do YOU want to reveal yourself?

[No? Maybe? Yes? I don't know? Wasn't it your idea to keep me a secret]

Yes, but that's because I worry about you. Now that you've got more control over your mana and spells I'm less worried. Still, I'll never not worry. If you want to tell people you're a person I'm never going to stop you Lily. I'm not sure if telling Bing is a good idea or not but at least we only need to protect Bodeir for a little bit longer. If one of our secrets is revealed early? It's not going to sink the whole operation if someone finds out, and if you want to tell people, I'm perfectly fine with that.

[Ok... well... admittedly I was just looking for you to come down one way or the other here. I'm on the fence as well. I feel like I want to tell her... but it does bring back memories of Sue worrying just how easy it is to talk to Bing. We haven't even been talking to her for twenty minutes, heck, has it even been ten?]

It's not like this is a massive secret though...

[It has been for this Contract.]

Hmm... well everyone would find out soon when I take you on a date somewhere. Do we want Bing to find out like that?

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[Ok... that's a good counterpoint. Give me a bit of time to think about it though.]

Bing smiled and gave a bit of a chuckle, "Oh yeah I can understand that feeling. My uncle has this horse and sometimes I can practically feel that stallion looking at me like an idiot. True I'd just fallen off after smacking my head into a branch... or that time I somehow led us half a day in the wrong direction... ok maybe the horse has a point."

"It's a big commitment," said Sue, "I know my parents talked to me about it a bit when I went through that stage. Obviously we didn't end up getting a pet, but I'm fine with it... even if I am jealous of Kat and Lily sometimes,"

[Yeah... ok we're telling her.]

"One additional thing," interrupted Kat, when she saw Bing was about to comment. "Just to make you aware..." Kat waited for Lily to bounce off her lap and into a corner so that only Bing could see and not

the rest of the crowd. Lily transformed, with a finger across her lips, "Lily isn't a familiar, she's just LIKE a familiar."

Bing's eyes went wide as she stared at Lily, who gave a quick wink before she transformed and hopped back onto Kat's lap. "Well... that sure paints your relationship in a different light..." mumbled Bing.

"In fairness, the relationship came first, not the bond or the transformation thing," explained Kat.

"Right... but I mean... even still..." Bing glanced somewhat warily at Lily. "That can't be normal..."

Kat shook her head, "No, it's very much not normal. I mean, it made sense at the time, and neither of us regret it but, no, it's very much not the normal way of going about things. Still, we do both agree that having a bonded familiar is a good idea. Plus, Lily IS adorable, and powerful,"

"How so?" asked Bing, "Cute as she is... she doesn't look all that strong,"

"Lily can cast spells," answered Kat truthfully. *It's better that we point out you're not an easy target, I think.*

[I agree.]

"Wait... so she has mana?" asked Bing, and Kat nodded in response. "Doesn't that mean she's drastically limited in lifespan? I mean... demons live basically forever right?"

Kat gave a 'so-so' gesture, "Demons CAN live basically forever but not all of them reach that level. I probably will though because my regeneration also prevents aging somewhat giving me an even longer lifespan than average. The lifespan thing is actually one of the main reasons we did this actually. Lily now shares my lifespan, she'll live as long as I do... though the counter to that is... she'll live as long as I do and not much longer. It probably works both ways, but we're not sure about that one,"

"Huh... I guess I can see why you'd go for that. Were you together long when you linked yourselves together?" asked Bing.

Kat and Lily shared a wince. "Not really?"

Bing rolled her eyes, "You're both crazy,"

Kat and Lily shared a look, and a shrug "Yeah probably,"

"Riiight... not sure I should really be taking advice from you guys, at least, not about spirit beast companions," stated Bing. I mean... she's not wrong per say...

[Doesn't mean she's right though. Clearly we've taken things to the extremes but that doesn't mean it's only a good idea for people as crazy as us.]

Fair. I can take that... "Just because we're at least a little crazy doesn't mean our advice is bad, plus I'm sure there are a lot of benefits to having a spirit beast partner. Granted, neither of us know anything at all about how it works on the qi side of things, but a pet is at least something to consider. Even if it has to be one that can somewhat hold its own,"

"I guess..." acquiesced Bing. "I just think I wouldn't want 'just' a pet. I feel like if I was devoting that sort of time and effort to something I'd want the relationship to be more meaningful you know?"

“Oof, call out the pet owners of the multiverse why don’t you?” snarked Sue.

Bing winced, “I’m not saying a pet is a bad idea... just that it is a bad idea, for me. I’m a sect heir, I spend all my time training or socialising. I don’t really get to relax, and if I do, it has to be something that’s also a bit useful. I’m lucky I enjoy talking shit with people so much and that I really can use it as a way to relax. If I had to cut into what miniscule free time I actually have to care for a pet that just... takes up time and affection and is an obvious weak point for me? It just wouldn’t be worth it.

“You know, that’s actually one of the reasons I respect Bodeir. He manages to have free time and keep up with his training, I don’t know HOW he does it, but I can respect it a hell of a lot. I just wished he’d share his secrets,” mused Bing.

I think his secret is being an idiot and doing it anyway? Not sure he has much of a social life either. Haven’t heard of any friends or even much extended family. “Bodeir... Bodeir does as Bodeir does and I don’t really understand how he works either,” said Kat diplomatically.

“Is there anything particularly fluffy you could choose as a pet?” asked Sue, “You could use it more as a pillow, and something to squish?”

“Eh... not really? I mean, people say that frost eaglet feathers are nice and soft but those people are FUCKING LIARS. Those feathers are cold as death and sharper than my ex’s words,” hissed Bing.

“Bing, you’ve never dated anyone, you said as much yesterday,” retorted Sue.

“I can dream SUE!” cried Bing.

“Sure you can dream but don’t use comparative examples of things that don’t really exist!” retorted Sue. Again.

“Screw you and your logic! I can have an ex in my head if I want! Wait no... Sue, break up with me!” returned Bing.

“We’re not even dating,” responded Sue, even as she knew what was coming.

Bing pretending to be shot in the heart with an arrow, she fell back onto the floor, clutching that the air, “Ah... such sharp, cruel words from my beloved. How can I even go on?”

“If you get off the floor I’ll let you feel my tits,” said Sue, mostly as a joke.

A blink later Bing was in Sue’s lap, kneading her hands deeply into Sue’s boobs. “Hmm... these are very nice... and very soft... and probably very comfy. Pretty sure I’m a lesbian now,”

“Bing stop being ridiculous,” said Sue. Notably, she did not say anything about Bing’s hands still being on her tits.

“I’m not being ridiculous. I mean, who even likes men anyway? What do they have? Not tits that’s for sure,” said Bing with confidence.

“Bing... men can have tits... even if it is a horrible look for them... and I happen to like men thank-you-very-much” returned Sue.

“Yeah but like... you already have wonderful tits, you don’t need a big, titty, girlfriend to keep you warm at night, you are the big-titty girlfriend,” reinforced Bing.

“Why do I feel like I’ve made a mistake somewhere...” mumbled Sue as Kat and Lily chuckled in the background.

Chapter 1012 Delaying Important Conversations

[Those pair better be careful, otherwise they’ll be putting on a show for whoever looks in.]

Yeah... a bit weird there’s no way to hide in a private box, but I guess it makes sense they didn’t bother. It’s not like they have one-way glass. Probably.

[Actually... we could ask? We just sort of assumed that there was no way to hide or obscure the room.]

Oh, well I have to ask in that case. If there is, you can chat with everyone! “Not to interrupt... whatever it is you two are doing, but Lily and I were wondering if there was a way to hide what’s going on here?” asked Kat.

Bing paused in her rather careless ministrations of Sue’s chest. “Oh... um... should be...” Bing said as she peeled herself off Sue and started to palm her hand over various parts of the wall. “Obscuring enchantments are rarely used... but standard... just... hmm... where did we...” Bing continued to pat down the wall. “Damn thing is all infused with qi so I can’t tell... is it here?” Bing gently tapped under the railing. Nothing happened. “No... maybe by the door?”

Bing moved over to the door and this time, she got it right. Well... not the first attempt, it was actually on the opposite side of the door but she managed it. Eventually. The open window to the fighting flashed for a few moments becoming cloudy before clearing up, at least on this side of the glass. Kat and Lily sent a look to Bing who nodded in confirmation. Lily transformed on Kat’s lap, and gave her a kiss. “Now, Bing, do you want to talk about your lesbian awakening?”

“Um...” Bing glanced around at three other girls. “I... I was mostly joking?” Lily kept staring, “I think?” Lily’s stare narrowed, “I mean... I... boys?” it sounded more like a question than any of the others. “I mean... I’m not?” Lily shook her head, “Can we maybe go over this... later? Or never?” Lily pondered on that for a moment before nodding. “Right... thanks... I... I certainly didn’t think this was how today was going to go... um... can someone change the topic please?”

“How does the inscription for the window work and what’s stopping people from seeing through it?” asked Kat, Lily pouted at Bing being given such an easy out but was also curious about that little fact, so was willing to let it go.

Bing’s smile light up the room, appreciative of the segway, “It’s pretty simple actually. The inscription is made to be incredibly fragile. It has just enough robustness to crack first, giving the people inside a warning, but then it will shatter. The idea is that we can’t make sophisticated enough blocking for higher level cultivators... so we don’t try. Instead we make it so that if someone else tries... the whole thing breaks.

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“That way we can shame the people who made the attempt, if we catch them, and the people inside have a chance to obscure whatever it was they didn’t want the crowd seeing. It’s still not perfect... but it’s much better than trying to work around people of much higher cultivation rank. Plus... even if we couldn’t take any action against someone who gets caught snooping... the embarrassment of ‘not being able to control their qi properly’ is a pretty major one so most don’t want to risk it,”

“Neat,” said Kat... and then the silence began. Sue and Lily really wanted to go back to the previous topic, Kat didn’t know how else to distract them and Bing was of course, really hoping they’d all just move on. It didn’t seem likely, but she could hope. So time passed and the fighting continued, at least down in the arena.

Eventually, the silence was broken by Lily, “Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it? I know it was a big deal for me when I worked out it... but my culture made it pretty easy to find the details of... even if it wasn’t exactly something you’d admit without consequences, sometimes rather nasty ones,”

“I...” Bing started to say she didn’t want to talk about it again... but was that the truth. Yes, it very much was... but should she talk about it? Perhaps that was the real question. “No, I still don’t think I want to talk about it. I was messing with Sue... but I’m not entirely sure if I believe that’s the only reason. I don’t want to let this become a heart demon... but I’d always imagined myself picking a partner as part of my duty as sect heir... and producing another heir... but I’m a twin and there is my brother... so as long as he doesn’t also... I mean, doesn’t like the same gender it... might be fine? Especially if I stepped back a bit... but...”

“No, this is a big thing and I’m not even sure if it’s something my parents will let me entertain,” Bing saw a bit of horror on the rest of the girl’s faces, “they’ll be as supportive as they can... but it has political consequences that might be hard to deal with. Potentially, it is easier to just say that I have no interest in romance and wish to focus only on my cultivation. It would buy time certainly... and if I’m strong enough nobody will care... that would be a long time away though. So... yeah just... for now, best not to think about it too much. I barely thought about romance before now, and a little bit of a sexuality crisis isn’t going to force me to change that,”

The other three weren’t entirely sure if they believed that... but Bing had made her point clear and they were at the very least willing to respect her opinion on the matter. She was a grown woman... probably... and they weren’t going to interfere too much with her life. Though Sue’s desire to leave behind a beacon was increasing quite a bit. Of course, if she’d told herself from a year ago that the first time she ever felt someone worthy of a beacon was because they were a friend instead of a fuckbuddy, younger Sue would’ve called the older one an imposter.

“Um... hmm... do you think you’re going to win the tournament?” asked Sue, as a bit of an opening.

“Not sure...” said Bing uncertain, “I mean, I’d love to win but truthfully? I don’t think I’m that great at the fighting aspect of cultivation and I haven’t managed to get to Rank 3 just yet. That’s more my brother’s department and I suspect that he’ll get close to winning this whole thing if he’s not eliminated by some wild dark horse. Honestly, I’m not sure why we’re hosting this tournament right now... it’s not going to be a great showing for the sect. Maybe we’re looking for wandering cultivators to recruit?”

“You don’t think your brother has what it takes?” asked Kat.

Bing shrugged at that, "I didn't say that... just that he's a bit too invested in training his fighting skill and not progressing his cultivation. He's only recently got to Rank 2 and most of that is probably due to the resources our parents shower us with. I could probably make it to Rank 3, with a shaky foundation admittedly, in another six months if our parents had waited... but nope, now we're here and I'm sure that there will be at least one mystery contender that managed to make it to Rank 3."

"That contender was nearly Kat," said Sue with a toothy grin on her face.

"What?" asked Bing confused.

"Kat here," said Sue gesturing to her friend, "was about to enter the tournament because you guys don't let anyone in the back rooms with the other contestants. Kat decided the best way to get back there? Signing up herself. I talked her out of it but it was a close thing,"

[Kat...] Lily growled mentally.

It seemed like at the time and I didn't even go through with it!

Bing forced a shiver, mostly for dramatic effect but part of it was real. "Yeah that... would be... well it would be kind of terrifying. A recent Rank 3 with no practice using their skills is one thing... but a demon at Rank 3? God it would've turned this whole tournament into a joke... and... and you are contracted to defend Bodeir right?" Kat nodded, "Urgh... and you would've forfeited as soon as matched against him right?" Kt nodded, "Urrggh... I'm so glad Sue managed to talk you out of it. This would've turned into such a shitshow..."

"Would it really have been that bad?" asked Kat questioningly.

Bing nodded, "Oh yeah. Not only would... well basically everyone feel horribly mocked, you also would've attracted my parents attention for disrespect, and maybe match fixing? And like... I get that you'd probably be fine but... urgh the political consequences. Just thinking about them makes me head hurt,"

Kat winced. "Well... um... sorry? I'm glad Sue talked me out of it?"

Bing nodded in affirmation, "Yes, yes you are. It would have turned into a massive mess and I doubt Bodeir Sr would've been pleased with you after the fact. Well... maybe not entirely... he's pretty protective of his son... so he might let it go... well until it became too much of a pain in the ass,"

Chapter 1013 Round 1 Bodeir Vs Larry

The group was distracted by a wave of cheers that went through the stadium. Turning, they found that at some point during their chats, the free-for-all rounds had ended. Now, Bodeir stood ready to fight across from his opponent. It was a male human wearing a short set of robes that stopped at their knees and knee-high boots with metal welded on to protect the feet and legs. Their arms had plates of metal wrapped around them and their fists were covered by gloves with two metal plates sewn on. One above the knuckles and one over the back of the palm.

"BEGIN" shouted the announcer. Apparently, the girls had missed the introductory speech. Bodeir instantly took a horse-riding stance, both hands raised slightly in front of him with palms up. His

opponent started to bounce on their feet, but didn't move from their spot. Left, right, left, right, the rise and fall of Bodeir's opponents feet started to speed up. Bodeir just watched him.

Kat decided to call him 'Plates' in her head for now. Plates started to shift more, instead of just stamping their feet in sequence they started to bounce left and right as well, going slightly further each time up until they were using the whole width of the arena as their playground. Bodeir stood his ground.

The bouncing continued, the speed increased, and suddenly they were stepping to the back of the arena. With the third direction added Plates had doubled their speed and to a normal human they'd be nothing more than a blur. Despite that... they didn't move a single centimetre forward past their starting position. Bodeir might've been waiting patiently in place, but Plates was waiting for something as well.

The wind in the air started to whip and whistle around plates, becoming visible streams of green that trailed off his limbs. That was the signal. Plates dashed forward... and Bodeir didn't move. Plates wasn't aiming for him anyway. Plates started to bounce around Bodeir like a grasshopper on crack. Each time Plates landed, a little bit more of the arena cracked under his power. Plates' speed increased again, for normal humans, nothing more than a series of explosions every time he landed.

Until he went in for the kill. Plates charged at Bodeir and Kat got ready. Plates was fast, maybe too fast for her to get down in time to stop him... but perhaps not. She was Rank 3 and she was ready. Kat watched as Bodeir still refused to move, and only the fact she could see the elf's eyes tracking Plates kept her in place. Finally, plates came in for the kick, his powerful legs aiming straight for Bodeir's head. A boom echoed across the arena at the sound of an impact... then a crash.

Kat could hardly believe it. Bodeir simply took the attack on the side of his face, and the moment Plates was stuck in place, dealing with the recoil of his attack... Bodeir swatted him out of the arena like an annoying fly. Plates crashed into the arena wall, unconscious.

"WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT" screamed Bing at the same time as...

"What just happened?" ... Kat questioned what she'd just watched.

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Kat and Bing shared a look, "You first?" asked Kat.

Bing shook her head, "You don't know who that was right?" Kat shook her head, "No, ok, then I really want to rant but we need to build up to that. I'm sure you have your own complaints but I KNOW him and that was fucking disgraceful. So... yeah you go first,"

"Well... I mean... not to say I don't have faith in Bodeir..." started Kat,

"Which you don't, not really," quipped Sue.

"... but I was surprised he could simply take such a hit without flinching," continued Kat, "and that he was able to knock his opponent out in only one strike. I know some of the free-for-all people were disappointing but there was at least one good person in the crowds I saw... so how... how was he so bad?"

Bing groaned, "Well... I can explain. I think. See, that was Lightning Fast Larry. He's a bit of an enigma, and a wandering cultivator that somehow manages to show up to important tournaments and has

consistently performed well in every single one he's entered. Now I'm wondering if they were all just him being lucky. That technique is somewhat new... but it's just a refinement of wind attributed qi really.

"What Larry was doing... was lowering the friction between himself and the air... and I think he also figured out how to reduce his weight so that he could get even more speed. However, in this case he seems to have forgotten that you need some weight behind your attacks to do any damage. I'm pretty sure I could've also taken that hit without flinching, and I'm no Bodeir.

"I think that's the other thing that really disappoints me. Bodeir is THE heir of the Mountain Shaker Sect. His affinity and cultivation style are exceptionally well known. He was always going to use earth based qi to defend from attacks and then hit back with extra power at the right moment. Sure Larry went for one 'large'..." Kat could hear the quotation marks around the 'large' in this case, "...attack to take him out instead of a number of smaller attacks. Which... I'm not sure it would've worked exactly...

"But Bodeir is KNOWN for taking low Rank 3 hits if necessary. Not without damage sure... but why in the world Larry thought Bodeir would be taken out by an attack with no weight behind it... I just can't fathom what was going through his head. Bodeir didn't even need to make his own hit all that hard. Bodeir ate all of Larry's built up momentum and then used the fact he was light and had no wind resistance to just throw him out of the arena. Sure Bodeir hit Larry pretty hard... but that was all overkill,"

"Well, what you're saying makes sense," said Sue "But as you said, Bodeir is the sect heir, is him winning really that big of a surprise?"

Bing shook her head, "No, not at all. Bing was definitely favoured to win this match... but Larry was one of the tournament favourites. He was unlucky to face Bodeir who is a good counter to him... but one attack? That's absolutely disgraceful. How do I explain this... it's like ordering a plate of mild spicy food, expecting at least a bit of a kick, taking a bite, and then wondering if there's any chili in the food at all. Even if it wasn't meant to be all that spicy, the fact that there's just nothing?" *novelnext.coM*

Bing waved her hand out at the arena where Bodeir had already left and the medics were picking Larry carefully out of the wall, "Larry's just lost, in the first round, to a single attack that Bodeir didn't put much qi behind, even if he was using it to strengthen himself. Not sure how much damage Larry took... but honestly his reputations not recovering from this for a long time..."

A round of nods answered that statement. Even though the other girls weren't native to this dimension they could see how embarrassing it was to unleash your ultimate attack... after being allowed to charge it up. All for it to do no damage and result in your loss. It was... a devastating set of affairs if Larry cared at all for his reputation. At least he'd have a bit of time blissfully ignorant.

"Is there anything else we want to watch here?" asked Lily, "Actually, how many more matches are there going to be today?"

Bing shrugged and said, "They'll probably want to get through all of the first round, so... three more matches per arena? As for if there's anything else we want to watch... maybe? I don't really know when or where my match is, nor Lian's so I can't exactly comment on that,"

"Oh right! You're in this tournament!" said Sue with a bit of surprise, "It... sort of slipped my mind. Do you need to leave for that?"

“Eh...” mumbled Bing. “I probably should? I mean... at the very least I should make my way to the competitor’s area... but as we already established I’m bad at directions and I don’t trust myself to get there without issue. Probably faster to let someone find me here,”

“I’m a little surprised they haven’t sent anyone yet,” said Lily. “I mean, now that you aren’t moving around wouldn’t you be easy to find?”

Bing shrugged, “Perhaps? I don’t really know how it’s decided by my parents or whoever is actually calling the shots. I just go where I’m told if I recognise the servant and it isn’t too silly of a request. I mean, I’m not just going to head to town when I should be fighting... but at the same time... if they just lead me away... might take me a while to notice we’re heading in the wrong direction. Probably when the scenery changes,”

Sue gave Bing a pat on the head, “Good luck,”

Chapter 1014 Lian vs ‘Solo’

The next fight wasn’t anything special, it was certainly closer than Bodeir’s fight, but it was just two swordsmen attacking each other at high speed for a while. Nobody in the room were swordsmen themselves, so it wasn’t like they could appreciate the skill that went into the fight... well, assuming that there was skill. The fight ended when one of the competitors swords broke so... they might’ve just been hitting each other as hard as they could. Hard to tell really.

That changed when Bing said, “Lian’s fighting!”

Everyone else in the room focused on the area on the arena that Bing was pointing to. Kat and Lily were surprised at Lian’s appearance. If ‘goth’ was in the dictionary Lian would be the example picture. Instead of pale skin like Kat, Lian’s leaned more towards an ashy grey... where it could be seen. Most of her skin was covered, her legs were covered by black tights... but Lily couldn’t appreciate them properly because Lian was also wearing a thick black skirt and black boots. So even if the skirt lifted a bit when she walked, the boots hid most of the rest... and the slither of leggings that were visible hardly did anything for the leg obsessed lesbian.

Her hair was black as midnight with purple highlights on the underside, and her top fit the same pattern, a black base, long sleeves, and a faint pattern of roses with just their outlines done in a dark purple. Her chest was... modest. Very modest. Only the low cut on the outfit let her show off her a-cup breasts... but they were still covered by a thin layer of black fabric made to look like a tightly wound spiderweb.

Finally, Lian’s face. It was marked by black makeup that surrounded her rather normal looking green eyes. Black onyx earrings hung from her ever so slightly pointed ears. Instead of having them pierced though, Lian had chosen to use clip-on earrings. It begged the question of why she’d wear them during a fight, perhaps Bing would know. Her lips were nearly black as well, but they didn’t get as dark as her hair or makeup around her eyes.

Her weapon was strange. She had a zither, a guzheng to be specific... but Kat wouldn’t have recognised either of those terms. What she saw, was a moderately sized string instrument that is to be played while sitting down and the instrument itself is horizontal. This guzheng had 25 strings... and Kat didn’t really know if that was significant or not. The whole thing was about as tall as Lian, and slightly smaller than Kat.

Lian's opponent was much less interesting. It was someone who might have been from Bodeir's sect. They were a mountain elf much like Bodeir, but their most noticeable feature was their missing arm. They wore mostly standard cultivator's robes but the sleeve had been rather untastefully ripped off. It was clear the rip in the robes wasn't recent. The elf moved with enough grace and poise that could never be recovered in such a short time had the arm been lost today. On their back was a longsword in a leather sheath.

As everyone in the booth was getting ready for the showdown, there was a knock on the door. Lily instantly transformed and then went to move... only to remember she was already on Kat's lap and that was a perfectly reasonable place for a normal familiar to be, so she just happily snuggled up. Sue, in a moment of panic, grabbed the nearest thing to her... which was Bing of course. Bing, not seeing Sue was a problem didn't resist and was pulled face first into Sue's large boobs.

Embarrassingly for Bing and Sue, the whoever was at the door didn't wait for any sign they'd been heard or were allowed in. They just swept the door open. It was someone in a fluffy butler uniform. They took one look at Bing, raised a single eyebrow and then waited. Nobody moved or said anything for a few moments. Bing trying to chase the gay thoughts from her head, Sue trying to fight off the embarrassment of her instinctual reactions. Kat and Lily... well they didn't really see the need to do anything.

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Then the butler walked up to Bing and grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and started hauling her away, "WAIT LIAN IS FIGHTING!" retorted Bing as she struggled in the butler's grasp. Of course, it was silly to think her clothes would hold up to her full strength, so the fact she was letting herself get pulled along pretty much said everything it needed to.

"I am afraid young mistress, that you have an upcoming match," explained the butler with a calm that seemed rather at odds with Bing's chaotic looking struggles.

"Can't we delay it or something? I want to see Lian fight! I didn't even know she'd be in this arena! Please!" begged Bing again.

The butler didn't stop though and they were already rounding the corner, "I am afraid not young mistress. I was order to get you and I cannot refute those orders at this time,"

"Wait but what about-" started Bing but before Kat and Sue could hear the end of the conversation the door slammed shut, blocking the sound from the hallway completely.

The three left in the room just sort of stared at the door for a few moments as they ignored the announcer hyping up the contestants in the background. "Is it weird I feel a little bad I didn't help her?" asked Sue.

"I mean... I feel the same even though if she really wanted to get away, I'm pretty sure she could have," answered Kat. Lily gave a solid nod, to show her agreement as well.

"Yeah... I wonder if the butler dude was stronger than her... or if she was just being dramatic about it..." pondered Kat.

"Could be either, maybe both?" suggested Sue. "I'd if I had to pick one she was just being dramatic,"

With that confirmed everyone turned back to the arena where the fight had already started. Lian had taken to sitting on the floor while 'Solo' the one-armed swordsman glared at her from afar. There was an obvious black circle around Lian and much less obvious patches of darkness that seemed to have sunk into the arena. There was also a general haze in the air that seemed to not really be doing anything. Lian had her hand on the instrument, and Solo had their sword at the ready.

Lian plucked at the strings of her zither, playing a morose tune as black dots seemed to flow from her place on the floor. Solo growled at them before slashing through one that passed nearby. It split harmlessly and dissipated as the fragments continued to fly past. Moving forward carefully, Solo tapped the patches of darkness with the tip of his sword and they all seemed to pop.

Gaining confidence, he continued moving forward at a walking pace, sliding quickly to the side whenever Lian sent a new wave of black dots after him. It looked like whatever Lian's plan was, it wasn't working as Solo reached a few steps away from her seated position. She hadn't made a move to retreat or advanced... when suddenly a discordant note wrong from her instrument, as if one of the strings had snapped.

The arena shuddered, and Solo went flying backwards. His clothing had somehow been shredded and his arms were covered in little holes, dripping blood. Solo wasn't going to let a little injury like that stop him though. He slammed his sword into the stone arena halting his backwards momentum.

Right as his feet reached the floor though, another sour note rang out, this time he was thrown into the air. Not willing to just go along with things, Solo flipped and seemed to kick off the air shooting straight towards Lian. She looked unworried even as Solo sword headed straight for his neck.

Lian played a harmony of three cords right as the sword reached the line in the sand. The notes rang like a gong out across the arena as Solo seemed to freeze in the air. Lian didn't show any joy at this, nor any fear when the barrier around her started to crack. She simply kept playing notes one after the other, building to something big. Solo glared, and his aura flared up the tip of his sword shone and he pushed on.

The shield cracked. Yet Lian didn't falter. One last strum of the zither and Solo dropped in place like a puppet with no strings. His sword clattered to the ground as blood exploded from the numerous holes he already had in his body. Lian turned to the announcer and waited for him to call the match.

He said nothing, and she whipped around to see Solo gritting his teeth and struggling back to his feet. Lian quick as a flash smacked him over the head with her zither and he collapsed back into the ground, going still.

Chapter 1015 A Wild Bing has Appeared

There was nothing major worth noting after Lian's fight. Bodeir come to grab them and they missed most of the final rounds of fighting, the night watch was quiet with only two watchers. One was that chill guy from the other day, and the new observer seemed to think that Kat wasn't paying attention to the stuff behind her. She just spotted him once and then kept track of his breathing. Kat's hearing might not have been well trained, but she could pick out any major movements from a source that was stationary. Kat ended up eating a full breakfast that consisted of mixed nuts with syrup on them. Not the healthiest thing really, but the crunchy, sweet, and somewhat earthy taste was alright.

The first surprise of the day, was when they turned up at the same box as yesterday. Bing would have all of his matches here, up until the semi-finals at least. For the semi-finals and above, they would be transferred to the main stage. Said main stage was currently being prepped for the final two matches, and as such, just the smaller, outer stages were in use. None of this was the surprise. No, the surprise was Bing sitting in the room waving at them as they entered.

“Bing what are you doing here?” exclaimed Sue in shock.

“Awwh... don’t you want to see me anymore Sue?” asked Bing with a pout.

“You know very well that’s not what I meant. I thought you’d have your matches to get to?” said Sue.

Bing nodded, “Yeah well, I wanted to talk to you guys! I even told Lian where we were hanging out today but she wasn’t willing to risk getting in trouble for doing this sort of thing. I won’t be around all the time, I’ll see Bodeir and Lian’s first matches of the day, then I’ve gotta leave for a bit, before I can duck back in for one more match of Bodeir’s and then I’ll be away till we all move to the main arena...

“Which is a bit annoying. I’m sure you both care about Bodeir’s fights more than me but the timing just doesn’t work out for me to be here for Lian’s. I will be sad to miss the Lian VS Bodeir fight during the quarter finals. Well... if they get that far. I suppose I am assuming a bit here... oh, and there’s a guy just outside ready to grab me when necessary. He showed me the way here,”

“Um... did you see anyone Kat?” asked Sue.

“Nope,” returned Kat and Lily shook her head from Kat’s arms.

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“Hmm...” mumbled Bing as she tilted her head sideways. “You sure he wasn’t outside? Should’ve been right next to the door?” the demonic trio shook their heads, “not near the corner either?” the shaking continued, “welp... not my problem then. If I have to forfeit it’s not the worst thing in the world,”

“Well... on that note, sorry we won’t be able to see your matches,” said Kat with a slight bow.

Bing just waved them off, “Nah, it’s no issue. I know you’ve got your Contract to deal with, and honestly, I’m not too worried about my matchups until I have to fight my Bro in the semi-finals. That’s probably where I’m losing truth be told. Just a question of how much effort I should be putting in. Sure I could maybe beat my brother if I through everything at him, killing shots and aces included... but he’s my brother, and we’re from the same sect. Tactically, it’d be better to just... forfeit. We’d get complaints if I did that though...”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not going to do it though,” said Sue as the demonic trio took their seats, “I can see you forfeiting to give your brother a better shot at victory and not really minding the reputation hit,”

Bing nodded, “Oh yeah. If this was a foreign tournament, I’d do it no hesitation. Only change is that I might intentionally try to run out the clock, give him even more time to recover. Oh, I’d got booed a bunch for it, but at a foreign tournament? That’s just considered good strategy even if it’d be unpopular. Some people wouldn’t have the stomach to do it. ‘Not honourable’ they’d say... which is really just a

strange way of saying 'I value my reputation too much to risk it giving a sect or family member a better chance to win'

"Here though? Where we set the bracket? It would be a massive problem and I'd totally get grounded for making it too obvious. It'd be a bit of a political announce for my parents... and they'd get on my case about it... so just not worth it. I'll fight Feng 'properly' without going all out," explained Bing.

"Right... are you worried about Lian and Bing getting to each other? And who do you think will win?" asked Sue.

"Nah, I'm pretty sure they can make it to each other... but I don't know who's going to win. If Bodeir was watching Lian's previous fight, then he'll know the best way to counter her... but technically speaking she should have the advantage. He's a slower combatant and she can layer down speed impediment curses, or perhaps constricting ones... but honestly? I suspect if Bodeir plays his cards right, he can win,"

"Oh?" said Kat and Sue together. Kat just waved at Sue, gesturing her to make her point first. Sue gave a little nod and continued by herself, "I suppose I can see that happening... but what exactly is the winning tactic for Bodeir? Care to share?"

"Just charge forward," said Bing, enjoying the shocked faces on the rest of the group. "No seriously, if he just... ignores her traps and puts everything into one big initial charge? Bodeir can probably take Lian out before she properly gets her things set up. Every moment he wastes doing something else, is time she can spend prepping curses,"

"Why did that one armed guy spend so long watching Lian yesterday?" asked 'Lily'.

"I'd guess he was trying to get a sense of what type of curses she specialised in. If she was able to set up a good rebound curse, and he just charged straight in, she could use it to throw him straight out of the arena. Plus, he might not have known what kind of curses she specialised in. A valid tactic against many of them is to just stall them out," explained Bing.

"Really? I can't see how that would work against Lian," said Kat.

Bing nodded and said, "Oh yes, it wouldn't work against Lian at all... but some curse masters essentially bring in a bunch of half finished but powerful curses, spend their qi activating them, and then blast anyone who charges right at them into smithereens. The weakness of that strategy is that you have to hold them semi-active, you can't release them in batches at that point. It's all or nothing. You also have to let them take as much as they want... or the curse could backfire.

"Lian instead, likes curses that build up. They take little starting investment, but their power compounds over time through various different means. Maybe Lian uses momentum, maybe she uses time and lets them gather ambient qi, or qi from her competitor. You saw her using those dots as charge points for her acupuncture curse, taking the damage from each blocked strike and attacking various points on the swordsman's body with that same strength. Of course, if he had just ignored them, they'd have exploded after a certain amount of time, so it's not like he could just leave them all sitting around either.

"Lian made sure the explosive part was really obvious. Didn't disguise it at all, in fact, she made it MORE obvious they were all essentially tiny bombs to try and encourage the exact poor behaviour the swordsman displayed,"

“Curses seem really powerful... is there anything that really counters them?” asked Sue unsure. It seemed odd that such a skill could be so powerful.

“Oh yeah, of course. The biggest and most well-known weakness is that they lose massive amounts of effectiveness on higher Rank targets. Sure that’s the same for everything, but for curses? You might as well not even bother. You can’t really jump Ranks with them no matter how skilled you are... unless you’ve got your target like... unconscious and weakened in a basement and at that point if you just want them dead you could’ve slit their throat in whatever prep time you needed to load them up with curses,” explained Bing.

Of course, she pointedly didn’t mention all the reasons you might still want to apply a number of curses to a rival once you had them in your clutches. Killing them was certainly not the only option. Servitude, impotence, tracking, plenty of things to embed in their qi or body as punishment when you couldn’t quite get away with the political ramifications of killing them.

Chapter 1016 Bodeir Beatdown

Two mountain elves walked out onto the stage. The only real difference between them was that one happened to have a noticeably more feminine figure. Their outfits were nearly identical and Kat would struggle to tell them apart based only on the face. The female figure seemed to also be earth attuned, as she had a small circle of pebbles that constantly floated around her fingers.

“Are they both from the Mountain Shaker Sect?” asked ‘Lily’

Bing shook her head, “Nope, Bodeir’s opponent is Bonnin, she’s from the Earth Singers Sect. They are in many ways the Mountain Shaker Sect biggest rivals... in philosophy if not power. They are a much smaller sect and only take in disciples with earth affinity, or something related like metal or lava... not that they HAVE a lava affinity disciple, but they’d certainly take them if they could,”

“What do you mean ‘philosophy if not power’” asked Sue.

“Well, the Mountain Shakers obviously use earth in... hmm... it’s hard to describe because I don’t totally understand it myself. They like... they endure, and then move in a single catastrophic attack. A bit like... a bit like a mountain enduring the winds, and then triggering an avalanche on people trying to mine its depths. They have a word for it... and a more eloquent way of explaining things... but I don’t really understand it myself.

“The Earth Singers... they make less sense but I guess as someone with wind affinity I understand them better? They are all about working with the earth. Flowing from one move to the other and following the natural state of things. Or so they say. They get their power, supposedly, by being more ‘in tune’ with the earth than the Mountain Shakers who apparently abuse their power over earth to force it into their moulds.

Um... hmm... ah, here’s an example. They both have a signature movement technique. Bodeir and the Mountain Shakers use... well I don’t know the real name but I call it the ‘Earth slide’ where they stand in place and then move the earth under their feet at high speeds to essentially slide places. The Earth Singers? They pride themselves on being able to swim through earth,”

“Well... which is better?” asked Kat.

Bing shrugged, "Some people would say the Mountain Shaker Sect must know what it's doing, it's older, more powerful politically, and militarily, it was founded recently, and it is still getting stronger... other would argue that the Mountain Shaker Sect only knows how to use brute force and that the control required to properly use the 'swim in earth' technique shows a much greater degree of skill with qi, and affinity with their element, that they are pathing the pathway to properly cultivate towards immortality," explained Bing.

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"Right but that doesn't say anything about what you think," pointed out Sue.

"I think the Mountain Shaker Sect probably has the better technique. It can be scaled up much better, and never really stops being useful, even once people take to flying, you can still make use of it. The Earth Singers though? It's an interesting skill but it just doesn't scale well as a movement technique. They aren't using the earth to go any faster, they're just able to swim through the earth. Does that difference make sense?"

There was a round of nods. Bing looked like she might have been about to say more when the signal for the fight to start sounded. They all swapped back to the arena, and Bonnin jumped straight into the arena, disappearing under the earth. Bodeir didn't seem concerned with this and just stood in place, waiting for the right moment. *Might just be waiting for her to attack. It's not like that technique lets her breathe through earth. Or at least... I assume it doesn't.*

[How long can cultivators hold their breath anyways?]

I have no idea. Would Bing be able to hold it longer as an air cultivator? Or less because she needs air for her techniques?

[We can ask after the fight.]

Kat nodded and kept watching. Bodeir remained still for a few moments longer before stamping on the ground, the arena shuddered a bit but nothing seemed to be happening. Bodeir didn't seem to be discouraged at all though, he started to flow through a series of stances, each ending in a stamp that shook the arena's foundations. Finally, after a set of fifteen, something changed.

Bonnin was sent flying from the earth, she managed to roll with the momentum and bleed it off before rolling into a ready stance... as best she could. It seemed that her left arm was broken and she was limping a little "You little bastard!" shouted Bonnin, "I don't believe you've mastered tremor sense to that sort of level! What trick are you using?"

Bodeir just shrugged at the accusation, not really willing to tell the other cultivator that tremor sense was just something he had, and it worked. He might not have been the brightest of the bunch, but his earth affinity was spectacular like his father. The idea that he needed to 'master' his tremor sense was silly. To him, it was like a penguin being shocked at a duck being able to fly.

Bonnin started to swing her arms around wildly, summoning up all the smaller scraps of rock nearby until they gathered around her like a swarm of locusts, and like locusts, she unleashed them to devour everything in their way. Bodeir didn't even blink, he simply held strong. The mass of rocks was only so accurate after all. Most didn't hit him, and those that did simply bounced off, doing minimal, if any

damage... to his clothes. The pelting of rocks continued, the cast offs that didn't make it to Bodeir were retrieved and added back to the mass of rocks Bonnin to be thrown again.

Bodeir just watched this all with a lazy gaze. He could wrench control away from Bonnin if he wanted to... but it was rather pointless in the end. The rocks were doing any damage unless he considered dirtying his clothes 'damage' and Bonnin was clearly exhausting herself. The swarm of rocks was making it hard to see just how little Bodeir cared about this assault, he hadn't even summoned up any rock armour to further protect him. It just wasn't necessary.

When Bodeir started to take slow steps forward, Bonnin started to notice something was up. The speed of the rocks doubled, they started to shatter on impact with Bodeir but he didn't slow, he didn't look worried, and he didn't even bother to speed up. In his mind he had all the time in the world. So he slowly, casually, walked forward. It was a great disrespect, but for someone with such 'weak' affinity to the earth trying to bar his way with pebbles? Well... Bodeir was a bit of an idiot, and didn't care all that much for his father's ambitions...

But this attack was really just so weak. So pathetic. A Rank 2 cultivator, one of the best from the younger generation of the Earth Singers... and they couldn't so much as cut him. Bonnin was of course, really starting to panic now, Bodeir had travelled more than half the length of the arena, the slow steady pace was unnerving Bonnin and she started to think she needed an edge.

In between waves, Bonnin started to stamp the ground, cracking it and throwing up larger chunks that she let loose against Bodeir. He took this without flinching as well, though for those watching closely like Kat, it could be seen that Bodeir forced them all to shatter into pieces just before making contact with him, giving only the illusion of taking the full weight of those boulders without flinching. While that obviously wasn't true for those paying attention...

Bonin was quite far gone now. Her half of the arena was a massive crater, Bodeir was right in front of her. And there was nothing she could do to stop him. She was exhausted, nearly out of qi... and utterly outclassed. A smaller fish... in an even smaller pond. That's all she was... those were the thoughts that haunted her as she started to wobble in place, not stopping her assault more out of stubborn pride than anything else, but most of the good sized pebbles were gone now, and the arena was in shambles. She couldn't break the bedrock below to provide more boulders.

Tears started to leak from the corners of Bonnin's eyes as she started to fall, stopped only by Bodeir's hand around her neck. "You were lucky to get this far. Really you were... and I pity the fact you're likely to get a heart demon from this. Perhaps you better attune yourself to the earth you covet like the rest of your sect. It might tell you why you are so weak," said Bodeir, in a dull deadpan voice. Bonnin's eyes just started to roll up inside her head. She was unconscious before she hit the ground.

Chapter 1017 Intermission for the Group

"Well... after that I feel like I have a few questions..." said Kat still shocked by what she'd just seen.

"Yeah I don't blame you... that was brutal..." mumbled Bing.

"What... what just happened exactly?" asked Kat.

“Eh... it’s not something that comes up often. See, there are two main things that people care about when you’re tested for cultivation potential. Your affinity for qi, which is basically how fast you can potentially cultivate, and what element your qi naturally aligns to. The first is obvious, no sense picking up a disciple if they’d take a hundred years to get to Rank 1 and die shortly thereafter. Some sects can be a bit draconian about how compatible they need their students to be with qi...

“But there are ways to improve it, if you’re very lucky, very rich, or very stupid,” seeing the question on the other girls’ faces, Bing elaborated, “a lot of methods require you to live through or just stay conscious during painful procedures. It’s considered ‘for idiots’ because brain damage is a very real risk in most of them... but if you’re already an idiot... might not be such a big loss,” Sue gave a nod at that but Kat and Lily winced, “yeah... anyway, that’s just one half of the equation.

“The second part is your affinity, and if the sect has the resources to get the most out of it. If they don’t, and your affinity for qi is high they’ll try and trade you off to a sect that can handle you better... or if you’re really good keep you anyway. However... there is also a third thing that people only sometimes test for. Normally it’s not important but...

“There are levels to elemental affinity. I don’t really know what they are exactly, and my parents were never willing to share... apparently just knowing your own affinity can stifle your growth. Not sure I believe it but... what you just watched was a good cultivator, Bonnin, fight a good cultivator... who is beloved by their element. It normally doesn’t matter that much, not at our level and not against most opponents... but when your affinity matches your opponent and you’re the same rank...” Bing gestured at the arena.

“That’s... well I guess it makes sense but that’s pretty brutal...” mumbled Kat.

Bing just shrugged, “Cultivation is known as a considerably unequal path in life. Talent is everything, and while many cultivators can mitigate it... the fact that they managed to become cultivators at all is already a massive stroke of luck. The fact that some of us are even more lucky? That’s just how this sort of thing works.

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“Though... normally we’re not quite so easily slapped in the face with that knowledge. Bodeir’s right this will probably become a heart-demon for the poor girl. Something that many people forget when they become a cultivator, even those successful ones... is that we are already exceptionally lucky... and someone is always luckier...” finished Bing trailing off.

“But... you, your brother, and Bodeir are all competent cultivators in your own right... doesn’t that mean it’s hereditary?” asked Kat.

Bing winced again, looking somewhat physically pained. “It... sort of... it’s more complicated than that... but normally it’s hereditary... but also... not all that consistent. Bodeir Sr, and my parents were both very lucky that their first children were born with high levels of talent... assuming we are the first children our parents had...”

“Is... is that likely?” asked Sue looking somewhat horrified.

"I can't say. Bodeir probably is... it was a big deal when his mother passed away and from what I know I doubt she was physically capable of having two children. My parents... my parents I really do wonder about. I'd like to think they wouldn't be so cold... we are the HOLY Icy Wind Sect after all... but the ICY part of that name is still rather apt. I know that there are a number of things a cultivator can do to increase the chances of having powerful children... but many of them are risky, sometimes to both parents.

"I don't know too many details, just the broad strokes. Apparently, it was necessary I learn those details. The simplest method to increase a child's affinity is to keep them inside the mother's body for an extended period of time using either a special technique or medicine. This is believed to give the child abilities more closely linked with their mother... which statistically is a good thing... but some worry it might reduce the talent of the child if the mother is the weaker of the two.

"The other option is to try and force the child to take a piece of their parents' cultivation when they are conceived. It's... potentially horrifically wasteful for the parents. The child can't hold onto the energy, and it will dissipate... assuming they survive the process. It has a high fatality rate and the adults don't get a refund on their cultivation, so normally this method is only attempted when they use other medicines to ensure they will conceive... because if they don't even do that?" Bing left the statement hanging.

"I think I know more than I ever wanted to know about cultivator sex," said Kat.

"Well... I somewhat agree," said Sue, "At least this aspect of it. I do however want to know more about cultivator sex, maybe your brother would like to teach me?"

"I believe I already mentioned my parents' stance on that for myself? Why would it be different for my brother?" asked Bing.

Sue shrugged, "Some people are hypocrites... or misandrists, or misogynists, or just idiots. That and well... what Fend does or does not tell his parents is none of my business is it?"

Bing gave Sue a flat look, "I'd tell them if he didn't. No way am I letting him get away with trying something like that without me, and without consequences,"

"Oh? Well if you were interested in a threesome why didn't you just say so?" responded Sue with a grin.

Bing slapped Sue lightly on the back of the head, "Get your mind out of the gutter,"

"Girl, I built that gutter. It's my home and I will not have you disrespecting it," retorted Sue.

"I cannot believe you can say such nonsense without being stopped by our truth curse," grumbled Kat.

"Metaphor is a perfectly valid way of speaking Kat, I've never built a real gutter in my life, and I could still say it. The curse, if it is a curse I suppose, isn't all that anal about a lot of things. You can sneak a whole bunch of things around with a bit of thought," said Sue.

"Right whatever," said Kat with a sigh, "How about we change topics?"

Sue gave an innocent shrug. She didn't really think she'd pushed that far, but she supposed that for Kat and perhaps Lily as well they'd gone from one questionable topic to another. Interesting though it may have been... certainly wasn't the happiest thing to think about. A number of questions were notably not

asked about what might happen to the children that didn't meet standard. There were... acceptable answers and others less so... best not to confirm anything.

Bing gave a bit of a nod at the suggestion. She didn't particularly like speaking on such dreary topics and Sue's attempt to shift the tone hadn't worked all that well, at least in her mind, so she was up for something different.

"Well, good," said Kat with a smile. "See, during the last match Lily and I were wondering how long a cultivator can hold their breath for? Bonnin had that swim through earth technique, which was cool... but she can only stay underneath for as long as she can hold her breath right? Even if she made pockets of earth down there, it wouldn't magically be filled with air, so that's got to be a major limiting factor right? Oh and do you need more or less air because you've got a wind affinity?"

Bing laughed a little at the question, Kat had been so seriously with the delivery but Bing couldn't help but find it so funny. It was a rather niche thing all told, but it was intriguing. "Right so... um... hmm... that's not really something I know off the top of my head Kat. I've never..." Bing paused to stifle her giggles again, "...that's not really something I've ever asked anyone. I'd guess that... I probably need less? Or no... maybe not? I guess it depends on how you're using your techniques. I know breathing is a big thing for most of them... though I do think lung capacity would go up as we gain power..."

"That's mostly because cultivation is all about refinement... and what else would a better set of lungs do but be able to hold more air and use it more efficiently. I'm just not sure if I would need more or less... it's not something I've ever really compared with anyone... but now I'm thinking about it... it's probably something I should. It would increase my understanding of air in unique ways. Thank you for the question,"

Chapter 1018 Lian Round Lian walked out onto the stage looking particularly tired. Despite that... Kat suspected she'd just decided to go for that sort of style with her makeup today. Why? Who knows, but a quick glance at Bing revealed a very unworried cultivator. *Yeah, almost certainly makeup then. Not sure why she'd want to look like that... but then again I've never really known anyone that got into the goth aesthetic. Lily?*

[I've got nothing. There was that one girl at my old school that went goth for a bit... but well... it was a bit before that whole issue with Stella so... I didn't really get to appreciate the change. I mean... she wears it well, even if it does look like she hasn't been sleeping.]

Oh? Well, if you had to rate her on a scale from... hmm... actually how does she compare to the rest of our friends?

[Kat! Rude!]

It's not like I'm going to tell them, and you've made it perfectly clear to them all many times over that you think I'm the most attractive. What makes it different?

[Well you're my girlfriend! So of course it's different. If I thought someone else looked better it'd be weird! The fact that I can claim you as a girlfriend makes all the difference. It's bad form to rank your friends against each other!]

Is it?

[Of course it is! At least... where they can't hear you? Maybe if we were all chatting together it'd be fine... hmm... why don't you go first then! What do you think?]

I mean...

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[Yes yes, I know that there won't be any lust. Purely beauty.]

Hmm... probably Nira at the top then? Wait, I want to make it clear that I'm also not bothering to count you on the list. Um... I'd probably go Nira... then Nixilei, then maybe... Sue, Green, Kamiko... then Lian? I think? Everything after Sue I think sit about the same. We have attractive friends.

[Why was Nira on the list though?]

Kat didn't do much to hide the instinctive answer to the question which was 'intelligence'. [OH. Oh... yeah right I guess I see how that could happen. They're the most similar to me in your head right? Nira and Nixilei? And Sue is... Sue.]

Yeah... I mean... Nira still looks nice, but yeah... intelligence is probably what made me order them like that. I blame you.

[I will happily take the blame for that. As for me... I don't really know what to say. She makes it so hard! You know my main fetish are thighs and legs and she's got that all completely covered!]

Are you trying to avoid answering?

[NO! Just... it's not very fair of me to rate her on anything while I can't see her best feature.]

Fine... better or worse than Sue?

[No comment]

Kat grinned at Lily's embarrassment as her girlfriend tried to mute the link. It... sort of worked. Kat could still feel Lily but it did seem to be a bit muted. *Perhaps I can disguise my teasing as 'training'.* Kat made no effort to hide her thoughts, but Lily didn't rise to the bait. Kat turned her gaze back out to the field and saw that the fighter in question had a large war-axe as their chosen weapon. It was double sided, and looked like it weighed enough to crack the ground if dropped.

The man wielding it was a gruff sort, with a bit of a beard and leather armour with a bit of padding as clothing. He was a purplish skinned elf... probably. He had a helmet on and his ears were hidden. His arms were left bare, though, with just a set of bracers that covered his wrists and about half the forearm and nothing else. His boots were thick leather and likely had a metal plate around the toes.

"Now, let the match between Goroth the Lightning Ram and Lian the Curse Mistress begin!" shouted the announcer.

Lian started the match the same way as she did last town, dropping down and started to strum as she layered mines across the ground, bunching them up a bit more directly in front of her, while summoning a shield around herself. Goroth, clearly having learned from the previous round, started to charge

forward, lightning sparking from his body as he did so. Mines burst underfoot into black gunk that seemed to cling to his legs but Goroth didn't stop... in fact he was still speeding up.

It didn't take long for Goroth to make it to Lian. No hesitation was in his swing as his axe sliced into the shield around the goth girl. Lian remained calm even as the axe made contact with her shield and started to crack it. A strum of the zither and a shotgun blast of gunk hurled itself at Goroth, who simply ignored the whatever they were going to do and wound up for another swing.

Black gunk built up across Goroth's body, some leaving behind bruises but most just leaving behind residue. Goroth didn't seem to be slowing down and the second slash caused the shield around Lian let out a pained shriek. Lian threw out one more round of blobs but Goroth didn't let up, he kept his axe in place and kicked out at the shield. Crack.

The shield shattered as his boot made contact but his attack was halted. The shield breaking caused an explosion that shot Goroth backwards. If he'd been standing off to the side of the shield he might've been sent out of the arena. As it was though... he was sent towards the back of the arena, black residue still clinging to him but he managed to land without too many issue.

Lian used this as a chance to load up more mines... but it didn't seem like she made any attempt to summon up another shield. Line after line of mines was added, once again especially in front, after Goroth's charge. When he had recovered, he glared at the mess on the arena and knelt down. The electricity around his started to grow in size, sparking off to the ground occasionally before he thrust a hand forward. A crack of thunder and a massive lightning bolt as thick as Kat's waist slammed into Lian.

Lian had actually raised one of her hands in front of her to take the lightning attack before it could spark into her weapon. Her arm looked rather charred but that was just her outfit... hopefully. Lian's hair had started to frizz up, puffing up slightly and letting off a few sparks. She was breathing heavily but didn't seem too concerned once the lightning had passed. She started to strum again, but the fingers on that hand spasmed, the lightning still dancing around her nerves.

Goroth took that as his chance to charge. He did spend a bit of effort dodging the mines at the start... only to realise there was simply too many of them now. He disregarded fancy footwork and simply burst forward, lightning streaming off his body and axe as he tried to make it to Lian before she could recover. Lian glared at the running figure and flipped her instrument around, letting her spasming fingers rest on the ends as she strummed out a somewhat shaky tune with her other hand.

Goroth started to slow noticeably. Tendrils reached up from further away mines, and his charge started to slow. He grit his teeth and overcharged the lightning around his body, letting it spark down into the mines in hopes to disable them. It had little effect. He simply had to deal with it. More and more tendrils reached out, trying to bind his arms and legs but Goroth was a proud man and wasn't willing to simply give up. He pushed forward...

...Making it all the way to Lian. He was right there. He just needed to swing. She hadn't tried to dodge at all. Goroth pulled his arm back... and it stayed there. No matter how much he grunted or struggle he couldn't bring the axe down. The tendrils of curse qi bound him tightly.

"Goroth! Can you move!" called out the announcer.

"YES!" he instantly shouted in response and returned to struggling against his bindings.

“You have one minute to make notable progress otherwise I’m calling the match!” said the announcer, clearly not quite believing Goro.

Lian didn’t move, and notably... she didn’t add any more tendrils either. She simply sat in place, recovering what energy she could just in case the fight continued. Goro struggled with all his might. Muscles bulging and rippling, his neck a mess of pulsing veins and straining muscles... but it wasn’t enough.

“Ten”

Goro growled and hissed.

“Nine”

Goro tried to shift his footing, fix his stance up a bit only to be pulled back a bit.

“Eight”

Goro started to lean forward, all of his body weight was put into the movement.

“Seven”

Fuck proper stances, he just needed one moment. One moment of freedom...

“Six”

To bring the axe down on the little bitch...

“Five”

But he couldn’t move. All of his efforts and he couldn’t move.

“Four”

Goro breathed deeply, a moment, just a moment to relax.

“Three”

Power surged through his veins. Lightning crackled.

“Two”

Goro pushed forward, the ground cracked...

“One”

And he was yanked backwards, down to the ground and covered in darkness.

Chapter 1019 The Financial Possibilities of Curse Energy

Bing clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention, “Right, cool. That was an awesome fight and I’d love to geek out about it like the martial arts nerd that I am but I’ll need to head off for my own fight soon, pretty much as soon as the next match starts, maybe a bit later than that... but it’ll take at least a little while to fix the arena. So, hit me, what questions and or comments do you have because I can’t stay long?” Lily looked over at the button to hide the outside view, “Yeah that’s turned on,”

With that confirmation Lily transformed and asked, “Why did Lian remain sitting still even after the shield was broken, it didn’t seem to have regenerated at all, she just took that lightning attack straight to her hand... but she had time to dodge right? Not that being able to dodge lightning seems normal either but it was SLOW even I could see she had time to move,”

Bing nodded and said, “Yeah she totally could... but curses are, ultimately, a form of trade. Most of them are simple ‘I pay X amount of qi to let Y thing happen’ but you can scale up from there, sacrificing important objects to yourself, or your target. Putting additional conditions on yourself, and plenty of other things.

“The biggest one Lian has, is that she limits the speed of everyone who fights her, and prevents people from noticing. Everyone is brought down to peak mortal condition and the way she does that? She limits herself to that as well. The shield? She sacrifices her own freedom of movement for a strong shield.

“It’s a good combination, because it doesn’t matter much to her that she’s moving so much slower than she possibly could. She’s not moving at all, and it makes playing her zither easier. Her shield can regenerate of course... but not all that quickly. Her qi is somewhat limited after all. If she had a swiftly regenerating shield that took major effort to break and also threw her opponent away when it finally does? She’d need so sacrifice something major like an eye or a lung for that, maybe just her feet entirely... or be a higher Rank of course,”

Lily winced, “I didn’t think it could be that serious... is... is that common? Having such strict conditions”

Bing shrugged and said, “Yeah somewhat. According to Lian, actually, you can ask her about this later, I’ll give her a memo to come chat up here if she loses, or when she wins! Um... right anyway, according to Lian it’s actually a lot harder to sacrifice small, temporary things. It’s easy to make a curse with some grand sacrifice and no knowledge of what the heck you’re doing.

“Lian’s got a saying, ‘If you see a village cursed to endlessly die and be reborn as punishment for their sins, it was a novice curse mage who did it. No a cultivator doesn’t have that much qi!’” Bing broke out into giggles at the punchline of the joke, and the rest of the girls joined in after a few moments. When Bing eventually got a hold of herself she continued, “Lian does actually say that... but yeah it’s one of her favourite jokes. Still, apparently curses really like to do nasty shit. It’s part of the whole domain, curses always want to create stronger curses.

“It’s a bit like that... weird pot thing people do with poisonous insects but with curses. Except in this case, you’re the vessel and the curses are always trying to escape. It’s not all that pretty... and another reason that Lian chooses to fight the way she does. Playing an instrument calms her, and keeping everyone locked to a slow speed, while she gets to strum away prevents her from accidentally sacrificing something major to win a match that doesn’t mean that much to her compared to whatever might be lost,” explained Bing.

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“Right... should she even be in this tournament then?” asked Sue.

Bing had the confidence to look mightily offended for her best friend, “Do you want to rephrase that Sue?”

“Just... is it safe for her? The risk seems unduly high compared to everyone else,” mumbled Sue, looking suitably abashed.

Bing let out a long sigh and started to explain, “Don’t worry I’m not all that mad... but I asked the same question once, and she pointed out to me that if she never gets any practice, she’ll never have the chance to be better. What if the first time she’s attacked she goes straight for sacrificing her own life? It’s a worry. I’m glad Lian has always been the more careful of the two of us.

“The worst thing she’s ever sacrificed was all of her hair for... hmm... I can’t remember what it was but I think it was that time my father tried to stop her from having so many sleepovers at my house. Lian’s parents... have not been the most supportive people in the world... and she was somewhat upset. Traded her hair to stop my dad talking for a while. Basically as long as she could make it...”

Bing winced, remember the day, “... it really wasn’t that long? My dad is much stronger than Lian and she wasn’t properly trained at the time... I think it lasted maybe ten minutes tops? Still, that just goes to show you the sort of danger that can happen. What if Lian hadn’t sacrificed her hair, but the ability to grow hair altogether? Or something worse? Plus, it made her bald everywhere and gave her the idea of how to avoid needing to shave as she got older. Girl has the smoothest of legs,”

Lily whistled innocently, trying to pretend she wasn’t thinking of anything questionable. It was made a bit easier by hanging around so many Succubi who had a similar thing going on. Especially when she could shift her focus back to Kat. It was still embarrassing, but much less so when the attention was focused on Kat’s legs instead of Lian’s. It just took a bit of mental effort to adjust.

“Her thing is legs” supplied Sue when Bing shot Lily a weird look. “You basically did the equivalent of telling her... well I was going to Lian knowing how to double her dick size, but you’re recent sexual awakening...” Bing glared at Sue, “... means maybe I should’ve just said Lian knows how to increase the size of her tits. Actually... IS that a thing you can do with curses?”

Bing shook her head, both to deny the question and to remove those images from her mind. Lian was practically her sister! That was just wrong, no matter how good of friends they were, or how her hold on her sexuality was slipping. “No, curses by their natures have to do something negative. Sort of. There can be a bit of mental gymnastics, and for minor things you can get away with it... but curses are always a removal of something, in exchange for something else, normally also bad.

“Hair removal is fine, because there’s less hair at the end of the process. Even if that’s something you want. The voice curse was also fine, because Lian temporarily took away his voice. In the fights? She took away portions of Goroath’s speed. You’ll notice she wasn’t making herself faster,” explained Sue.

“So what you’re saying is... breast reduction is totally on the table?” said Sue with zero shame. “What about ass reduction? Ooh, what about moving fat from somewhere undesirably like the stomach and putting it in her tits or ass?”

“Ok... first off... yes probably... and Lian is going to love those ideas... but that’s really not what you’re supposed to be doing with it. Curse energy is dangerous, not some easy weight loss solution!” grumbled Bing.

Sue shrugged, “I think it’s a great business opportunity, all the girls would be willing to pay big money for Lian to... do a little work...”

"I hate the fact that this is a good idea SO much right now," whined Bing. "But she's always talking about needing her own money and not mooching off my parents so much. I'd be a horrible friend if I don't point this out to her... but I just... it feels so wrong. Like... like seeing the sun come up in the West. Wait, no, I'm forcing her to meet you three when she's finished with the tournament. YOU can tell her. And if she asks why I didn't? Please take credit for the idea,"

Sue gave a shrug just as the announcer started to talk about the next fight. "Dammit that's my queue to leave. I wanted to go over more of Lian's fighting style and what Goro did right and wrong... but I guess that will have to wait for now. See you both later! Hopefully we can chat more after my next fight or two!"

With that Bing waved to them all and waited for Lily to transform before heading out the door. Off to do her own fighting. Kat, Lily and Sue watched her go. A little sad they wouldn't be able to watch Bing's match themselves. Perhaps for the later rounds, if she made it that far.

Chapter 1020 Do We Care About These Fights Minor with Side Characters?

The next two fights both had rather clear winners, even if those winners looked, and fought very differently. The first match was over the quickest. It wasn't even clear what the second person's affinity was. It also wasn't clear to Kat and co, what the winner's affinity was either. Her name was announced as 'Beatrice' and she proceeded to completely demolish her opponent. It was brutal.

Beatrice was rather short, but she wore a suit and tie, that looked very out of place amongst the cultivator robes of her competitors. She had a short bob cut and a pair of glasses on. Kat's excellent eyesight allowed her to see that these glasses didn't actually have any frames in them. Her opponent was a mountain of a man, easily twice her height. It didn't matter.

As soon as the starting whistle was blown, Beatrice rushed in with just her fists and started to systematically demolish the guy. She was too fast to be stopped, and made sure to break each of the poor man's limbs as she went. She started by charging in, a move that was matched by the Mountain. They clashed in the centre, and Beatrice won by kicking Mountain hard on the elbow, shattering the joint.

Mountain reeled back in shock... but that was just more openings. Beatrice used that shock to break both of his kneecaps, forcing Mountain to collapse to the floor. He opened his mouth to forfeit but Beatrice broke his jaw with two well placed punches preventing that. Once he lacked the ability to forfeit she backed off, giving him just enough time to prove he could still stand. Probably had a concussion and didn't realise that dropping the ground was much likely to get the match called. Much safer for him in the long run.

When he wobbled to his feet and had a chance to look around, Mountain realised he was in trouble and made his way to the edge. How he managed to walk with broken knees was a mystery Kat didn't want answered. Perhaps they weren't really broken... but the loud cracking sounds Beatrice had forced his body to make when they were struck implied pretty heavily that it was only his qi and willpower keeping him moving.

Before he could get to the edge, Beatrice kicked him in the forehead, sending him back towards the centre. He crashed onto the ground, bleeding from a number of places. He remained there, breathing heavily, and the announcer asked "Can you continue?"

Before he could answer though Beatrice kicked him in the side before stomping on his foot, likely breaking it in the process. With that bit of leverage she pulled him to his feet and then stomp both of his feet into the arena, pinning him upright with a bit of extra effort. Mountain was terribly done at this point and tried to collapse while standing. It was looked massively painful and didn't even work...

The announcer called the match anyway. Technically Mountain could contest the ruling if he wanted to... but everyone in the arena doubted he would. He had lost spectacularly, and Beatrice was still in perfect form, without so much as a speck of dust on her clothes, or a single hair out of place.

"I wish Bing was here so I could ask how normal that is..." whispered Kat somewhat horrified.

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"I... I'm not sure? From what I know... and can tell... some people will think that he got what he deserved because this is a tournament and everyone has their own fighting styles... but that was particularly brutal. The fact he couldn't forfeit was certainly the harshest part," responded Sue.

"Let's hope the next match is much cleaner," grumbled Kat.

Kat would get her wish.

The next match also featured a man and a woman, one of them was Tess, the chiselled woman Sue thought had skin the colour of an eggplant. She was wearing a crop top and baggy pants, leaving her arms and abs on display. It was an impressive amount of muscles compared to her pears and she looked more than ready for a fight.

The man on the other hand, was human, and looked like he'd spent more time lifting books than lifting weights. He was reedy, and the robes he wore hung off him as if he'd picked sheets to wear instead of clothes. He wasn't short by any means, but he was hunched over and seemed to small. He was leaning heavily on a metal staff and had a necklace of large beads about the size of an enclosed fists hanging off his neck. To the people watching, that seemed like a rather bad idea. They were quite large, and he did not wear them well.

His hair was perhaps the most pitiful part about him. It was thin and wispy with barely any colour to it... if grey could be called a colour. Kat was pretty sure he'd look better if he just manned up and shaved his head clean. Everything about him screamed pushover... except for his eyes. His eyes were a crystal-clear blue that seemed to hold a depth to them that belayed the rest of his appearance.

"Tess, the elven weapon, vs The Man with No Name... BEGIN!" shouted the announcer.

What?! He has no name? That's just annoying. I'm going to call him 'Bob'. *NovElnext.com*

[Really Bob?]

Well what else am I supposed to call him? He's not got a name!

[I mean... anything else?]

Nope. If you want to call yourself 'the man with no name' you can have a generic name.

[What about John Doe? I feel like that's a bit nicer and it's a bit of a reference to people who understand where the name comes from.]

Lily this is just for naming him in my head, it doesn't need to be complicated... but I guess I'll go with John Doe. It's not that big of a deal.

Tess pulled a set of dual swords from her storage ring and charged, trailing ice under her feet as she ran forward. John simply took a few casual steps forward as if he was taking a pleasant stroll through the park. Tess' attack seemed to come out of nowhere, as she split in two in between steps. An ice clone went left, and she went right, four blades all homing in on various vital areas of John's body. He still didn't look worried in the slightest, not even when the weapons made contact with his body.

Instead of the sound of metal on flesh, a pleasant chime rang out as Tess froze in place. John stepped backwards, around the weapons, and Tess continued to remain in place. John simply walked around behind Tess and then slammed the butt of his staff into her head, sending her forward into the ice clones blades, "You lack discipline," said John.

Tess' eyes went wide but she dismissed the ice clone before the blades could make contact as she stumbled forward. John followed up his strike with a whack to the back of Tess' knees, "You lack strength," he taunted forcing her to drop into a roll to avoid just falling to the floor. When she popped back up John was there in front of her and slammed a headbutt into her nose.

Tess stumbled backwards, reeling from the strike and flailing her weapons wildly in front of her to get a bit of safety from a follow-up attack. John just placed a finger in the way of Tess' weapon, freezing her in place and walking around behind her placing his staff across her neck and pulling tightly. Tess came back to the world being choked. "Finally, you lack the desire to win," taunted John.

Tess grit her teeth and tried to slam her head back into John, but he just moved off to the side. Seeing this, Tess tried to stab him but he shimmied out the way, just getting a small cut on his robes. Tess kept up her assault and managed to free herself by aiming at John's thigh. "You talk too much," growled Tess, using precious air to back-talk.

Which was a really bad idea when her follow up move was to breathe a large amount of snow out of her mouth. Tess just couldn't keep it up for long, and John was able to weather the proverbial storm by standing there and taking it. When the storm dropped, Tess jumped back and used the chance to catch her breath. John simply walked forward slowly. Perhaps it was a limitation he had.

Tess bounced around, kiting John for a while as she recharged. John didn't seem displeased with this behaviour, he just kept following Tess as she circled around the arena. The match stalled out here for a bit while this was happening. Eventually, Tess thought she saw an opening and dashed in, three ice clones this time.

John blocked the strikes from two, and took the strike from Tess, and one other clone before she tried to knee him in the balls. John took it without flinching then slammed his palm into Tess' temple, dropping her like a sack of bricks.