

Seller 681

Chapter 681: I'm going to leave

Mark walked beside Lan Xia, their pace steady and their auras suppressed as they made their way to meet the Sect Head.

Behind them, Reva, Yuan Feng, and Ryder had already been escorted away by Lan Xia's personal attendant to be accommodated within the guest wing of the sect.

As they passed through the frosted corridor of the inner sanctum, the disciples they passed bowed low, whispering among themselves.

News of their return had already begun to circulate.

Inside the sect's throne chamber, Lan Yujian and the other two grand elders were waiting after receiving the message from an attendant of their arrival.

The moment Mark stepped in, he and Lan Xia both lowered themselves into a respectful bow.

"Disciple Lan Xia greets Sect Master."

"Disciple Lan Zhen greets Sect Master," Mark added with calm, raising his head to meet the elder's sharp gaze.

Lan Yujian's eyes remained still for a heartbeat... However, Lan Yuxuan leaned forward, her gaze sharp as a blade as she questioned. "Alright, both of you. Where the hell were you all this time?"

Her voice cracked through the hall like a whip.

"Both of you have left without a word. No letter was left behind, and neither of you could be contacted either, meaning both of you have crossed into a different plane of existence. We even sent disciples to look for your whereabouts. Months have passed. We had no clue if you were alive or devoured in some abyss!"

Mark's eyes didn't waver, though his shoulders tensed slightly. "It was a personal matter," he said.

Lan Yuxuan's lips thinned. "You don't have to say if you don't want to, Lan Zhen."

Then she turned toward Lan Xia, her gaze narrowing. "But what about you, girl? Are you going to give me the same vague answer?"

Lan Xia blinked innocently, then tilted her head with a plain expression. "Well... my husband doesn't want to talk about it, so I think I'll keep it that way too."

"Say what?!"

The shout echoed.

Even Sect Master Lan Yujian's usually composed demeanor cracked slightly. His eyes widened, and Grand Elder Qiao Fei almost choked on his spirit tea.

Lan Yuxuan pointed a trembling finger at both of them. "You... you... Both of you got married?!"

Mark rubbed his temples with a sigh. "No, we didn't."

"But she just said..."

Lan Yujian cut in, his voice sharp but curious. "Xiao Zhen, if you aren't married, why was she addressing you as her husband? How far have you two gone in your relationship? "

He fixed his gaze on Mark as a frown appeared on his face. "Xiao Zhen, it is a sin to establish a physical relationship with a woman before marriage, one that results in an expulsion."

Mark raised a hand. "Before your imaginations grow wild, let me confirm that we haven't gotten anywhere. And we didn't establish any physical relationship either."

Lan Xia turned to him, blinking innocently. "But you agreed to marry me."

Mark's brows lifted. "I didn't exactly agree. I said—"

She cut him off, eyes sparkling. "You said you don't have any problem marrying me. That's as good as a yes, right?"

Mark paused. "Well... that's true."

She clapped her hands together, spinning on her heel to face the shocked council.

"Then it's settled!" Lan Xia beamed. "Elders, please make the preparations for our marriage!"

A stunned silence filled the chamber.

Elder Qiao Fei blinked. "That's not how this works..."

Lan Yuxuan opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her gaze darted between the two. "Since when did this girl know how to be cheeky?"

Mark sighed again, feeling a headache coming on. "Can we... talk about this later?"

Lan Xia just smiled sweetly, hands behind her back. "Why? Are you trying to escape now?"

"Enough. We can speak of marriage later." Lan Yujian interrupted them, gaining their attention. Placing his hands on his knees, he further said. "There's something more urgent at stake right now."

Mark and Lan Xia both turned serious, their flirtatious tension quickly dropping.

Lan Yujian clasped his hands behind his back and looked over them with a calm yet heavy gaze.

"Two months from now," he announced, "our Sect will take part in the Great Sect Expedition—a joint mission with the top sects of the upper realms. To enter, one must at least be an ascendant and their age shouldn't be higher than 50 heavenly years (114 Earth years). And I've selected both of you to lead our team."

A slight murmur passed through the elders.

Mark raised a brow. Lan Xia, however, simply crossed her arms with a teasing smile.

"Well, two months is plenty of time," she said brightly. "If we proceed with the marriage, we can go on the expedition as husband and wife."

There was a stunned silence from the elders once again. Elder Qiao Fei looked like he was mentally calculating dowry costs, and Lan Yuxuan let out a faint groan.

'Why is this girl so obsessed with marriage all of a sudden?' They all seemed to wonder silently.

Mark slowly raised his hand. "I'm sorry... but I won't be participating in the expedition."

That brought the room to a full stop.

"What did you say?" Lan Yujian's eyes narrowed, his tone suddenly a touch colder.

"I have to return home," Mark said simply. "There are people waiting for me on my earth. I can't stay here for too long."

Lan Xia blinked, then gave a soft laugh. "Oh, right! I completely forgot that you had a family back home." She turned toward the council and bowed slightly.

"Sorry, elders. I guess we'll have to drop out."

Then, with a straight face and absolutely no hesitation, she added: "After marrying, I'll leave the sect and go to the mortal realm with Lu Zhen. I'll live the next part of my life there."

The hall erupted.

Lan Yuxuan nearly dropped her chair. "What!"

Elder Qiao Fei gasped as though his old heart had been pierced. "Leave the sect? Leave the realm? You!"

Lan Yujian's mouth opened slightly. For a moment, even he was speechless. "You... want to marry, retire, and descend—all within two months?!"

Lan Xia nodded cheerfully. "Yup. Isn't it efficient?"

Mark let out a sigh. "Lan Xia, you don't have to go that far..."

"I do," she cut in smoothly, raising one brow. "Didn't you say you didn't have a problem marrying me? Then why are you hesitating now?"

"That's not the point—"

"Then what is?" she asked, walking closer, arms behind her back. "You're returning home, and as a wife, I have to be where my husband is going to live. Isn't that the whole point?"

The elders were now clutching their chests like victims of a novel, looking at Mark like he'd poisoned their prodigy.

Lan Yuxuan, usually composed and stern, now stood with visible shock and disbelief across her features.

"You're... seriously just planning to leave the clan?" she stammered, struggling to keep her voice even. "Did you forget—you're one of the three heir candidates! And if both of you leave... then who the hell will lead the clan in the future?"

Mark let out a casual shrug, as if she'd just asked him if he wanted tea or coffee. "Elder Yuxuan, you're also an heir candidate," he replied nonchalantly. "You can lead the clan."

Before Yuxuan could combust, Mark added flatly, "Also, I'm taking my sister back with me."

"What!" Lan Yujin's voice hit a pitch not heard in years, but before he could respond, Mark calmly raised his hand.

"No worries. I'm not abandoning the clan. I'll visit every now and then."

Lan Xia looped her arm around his affectionately, a bright, girlish smile on her lips, adding. "We will visit every now and then."

The sight of her clinging to him so sweetly sent another wave of heartache through Yuxuan, who let out a long, defeated groan.

Then came the silence. The long, heavy silence carried judgment, shock, and contemplation.

Lan Yujin finally spoke, his voice cold and firm. "Alright. Both of you can go. I won't chain you here. But—"

His eyes sharpened.

"Shang Jiao stays. She is the inheritor of the Blizzard Pegasus' will. She will remain in the sect."

Mark's response was instant.

"I don't care."

Yujin's face twisted. "How dare you—!"

Mark turned to face the old Sect Master squarely, his voice like steel.

"If Lan Xia wasn't clear earlier, I'll say it again. I have a family waiting for me. I have children. I've stayed away from them for far too long already. I'm not going to sit here and play power games when my kids are growing up without me."

He took a breath and added, "And frankly, no one here even likes me."

Lan Xia blinked in surprise, then softly said, "I like you."

Mark glanced sideways at her as he commented sarcastically. "I know that, sweetie but..."

Lan Xia blinked again, cheeks instantly flushing pink. "Sweetie...?" she echoed under her breath, completely dazed. "I'm... sweet...?"

Lan Yuxuan groaned and turned away, rubbing her temple as she muttered, "Oh my god... she's gone. Completely gone. All those years of emotional discipline—down the drain. She's completely smitten."

Mark ignored the groans and turned toward his ancestor with calm resolve in his gaze.

"Listen, I'm not ungrateful. The clan helped my sister. I haven't forgotten that. One day, I'll return the favor, in full. But for now... You have to let us go."

Yujin stared at Mark for a long, heavy moment. His knuckles whitened at his side.

After a while;

Far away from the sect, in the Ancient Lan Clan's Main residence;

"Say what!"

Mark stared at his sister, his eyes widened in shock.

"I'm not coming back with you, Brother," Shang Jiao said calmly. "I intend to go on the grand expedition."

Mark: "..."

Chapter 682: The Fourteenth Prince of the Heavenly Ocean Empire

"I'm not coming back with you, Brother. I intend to go on the grand expedition."

Mark blinked at her as if she had grown a second head. "But it's not safe! I mean... you're not even in the Immortal Realm yet."

Shang Jiao's gaze didn't waver. She replied firmly, "I know. But I've made my decision."

Mark took another step closer. "You're only eighteen, Xiao Jiao. You don't need to rush this. You've got decades to grow, and there's no need to throw yourself into danger now."

She didn't flinch. "It's what I want, Brother."

Mark narrowed his eyes. The determination was real, but he could see there was something wrong with her.

"No," he said, his tone quieter now, more probing. "You're hiding something."

He knelt slightly, looking up into her eyes with gentleness. "Xiao Jiao, you can tell me. If it's something I can help with, I will. If not, I'll try to understand."

His voice lowered further. "Does it... does it have anything to do with the private conversation Blizzard Pegasus had with you?"

Shang Jiao's breath caught. Her eyes twitched slightly, a flicker of hesitation passing through her facade. Her lips pressed together, and for a moment, Mark thought she might actually tell him.

But then she shook her head gently.

"Brother... I'll tell you when I'm ready," she said at last. "But right now... what I need is to become an Immortal."

Mark stared at her for a few seconds, then sighed heavily and stood up.

"Alright..." he muttered. "I won't stop you. But..."

He looked at her seriously.

"Promise me you'll send word home before you attempt the Lightning Tribulation. I want to know. I want... at least the chance to be there if something goes wrong."

Shang Jiao nodded once, solemnly.

Mark exhaled again. "Also... don't go on the expedition just yet. I'll send Alina with you. She might not be as strong as you right now, but by the time you meet her, she will be powerful enough to protect you. If not, at the very least, I will be more assured of your safety with her."

Shang Jiao paused... then smiled. It was small, quiet, but warm.

"Alright, Brother. I promise."

Mark gave her a long look—half relieved, half still worried. But he knew this was a path she wanted to walk, and he couldn't restrict someone's freedom of choice.

The following day passed in an almost oppressive silence as Mark prepared himself for the coming clan head trials.

Mark originally intended to leave the clan alone, but with his sister not intending to come back with him, he slightly changed his plans.

Instead of leaving, he decided to take it over so that his sister wouldn't be used as some puppet ruler. He spent the rest of the day trying to formulate on how to do that, while he still can be with his family.

And in sheer coincidence, on the third day since his arrival, he was summoned by his great-grandfather, the sect head, who is currently at the clan.

He arrived at the Elder Council chamber, where all the elders and the Clan leader gathered. As he entered, his eyes found Lan Xia, standing in a corner with an air of detachment.

But when her eyes spotted him, they suddenly came alive.

Mark didn't react much and simply nodded politely as he approached the gathered clan elders.

Once Mark had exchanged pleasantries with the clan elders, Lan Yujin, the clan head, spoke in an authoritative voice. "Lan Zhen, we have made a decision. Due to certain unforeseen circumstances, we have decided to push forward with the clan head trials, and they will commence in three weeks' time."

Mark's heart skipped a beat at the mention of the trials. He just changed his decision to become the clan head, and suddenly, the opportunity landed on his lap.

He was ready to voice his acceptance, but Lan Yujin continued before he could speak.

"You have already told us your decision to leave the clan, but this is a formal announcement. In three weeks, the trials will start formally. If you aren't interested, meet me at the sect in three days with a formal retirement letter. If you are interested, then bring a letter of acceptance." Lan Yujin's words were final.

Mark exchanged another glance with Lan Xia. He could tell she wasn't thrilled either.

In the end, he only nods.

Three days later, Mark walked into the Sect, nodding to everyone who greeted him on the way.

But as he approached the clan leader's residence to give his decision, he was told to wait outside. A visitor had arrived from the palace, someone important, and the clan leader was busy with matters of state. Mark could only stand there, outside, and wait.

As the minutes stretched into what felt like hours, his mind began to wander. It wasn't long before the soft rustling of footsteps interrupted his thoughts.

"Zhen-ge," a familiar voice said.

He turned, and there she was. Lan Xia stood a few paces away, her arms folded loosely over her chest. Her usual blank demeanor just disappeared as soon as she saw him. She hastened her pace and reached him.

"Sister Xia?" Mark blinked in surprise, by coincidence.

To that, Lan Xia was taken aback. "Zhen-ge, we are about to get married. Can't you stop calling me that?"

Mark awkwardly scratched his cheek, "Sorry. It just feels weird." But after a pause, he added quietly, "Xia'er."

Lan Xia blushed a little at that address. She averted her gaze.

Meanwhile, inside the sect head's chamber;

A young man in formal robes was seen sitting before the sect leader. It was the Fourteenth Prince of the Heavenly Ocean Empire. There was a eunuch standing beside him, and he spoke in a tone that left no room for argument as he unfurled the scroll.

Lan Yujin's brow furrowed in confusion as he heard the decree from the Emperor. "What is the meaning of this? We have a Chaos Realm expedition in two months. And now this? What was His Majesty thinking?"

The Fourteenth Prince did not waste time with pleasantries. He spoke directly in a stern tone. "Patriarch Li, mind your tone about His Majesty. And his decision didn't just come out of nowhere. The Ravagers were confirmed to be contact with the enemy forces more than once. We can no longer maintain an alliance with them. And the emperor has decided that the Lan Clan must participate in the war against the Ravagers. His decree is final."

As Lan Yujin's face darkened, the Fourteenth Prince's expression remained impassive as he continued. "Also, I'm only an envoy who is here to pass you the order. As stated in the decree, only the Lan Clan and the Ice Elves will be involved in the coming conflict. You must prepare your forces immediately."

Grand Elder, Yuxuan's anger flared at that statement. "This is a trap. You're clearly setting us up."

The Fourteenth Prince gave a curt nod. "Might be or might not be, Elder. I don't care. The emperor has made his decision. If you have something to say, tell it to him."

"No way, the Lan Sect will not accept it," said Yuxuan.

Lan Yujian waved his hand as he stroked his beard. "Stop it, Elder Yuxuan. He is just a messenger. No need to say anything to him."

As the Fourteenth Prince stood and left the room, Lan Yuxuan growled. "I know that the Emperor was threatened by the return of our guardian. That's why he was purposely sending us to the war to reduce our strength. And even if Ravagers turned against the throne, the Empire can use many other forces to go against

them. But he only ordered us and the Ice Elves. Everyone knows that we are the very reason the Ice Elves submit to the Empire."

The Sect head nodded, his gaze seemed serious. "I don't know. I feel bad about this, already."

"Of course, it is bad," Yuxuan said. Qiao Fei stayed as a silent spectator.

The Sect head shook his head, "No, I'm not talking about us. I'm talking about His Highness."

"What do you mean?" Yuxuan furrowed her brows.

The Sect head shook his head, drinking the remaining tea from the cup. "I don't know."

Meanwhile, Mark and Lan Xia sat on the ground, beneath a cherry blossom tree, against its trunk in a relaxed posture. They had been talking, having casual conversations. Lan Xia was subtly intimate with him, even though they were in public. However, this intimacy didn't look like that between lovers or a couple, but looked more like best friends who had grown up since childhood.

Just as Lan Xia reached out for a blueberry from the bowl and fed him in the most natural way while tossing one in her own mouth, the heavy footsteps of boots echoed down the stone path. Followed by those sounds, a voice was heard. "Lan Xia?"

Lan Xia looked up.

The Fourteenth Prince of the Heavenly Ocean Empire stood there, his eyes fixed on her. For a brief moment, his expression softened, just a flicker, as if seeing her brought back some old memory or something.

"Lei Tianxu?" Lan Xia blinked.

The Prince smiled, but then his eyes shifted to Mark. His brows creased slightly, and the warmth in his eyes vanished in an instant.

"Lan Xia," he said, his voice firm but clearly trying to sound courteous, "I did not expect to find you here. I was hoping we could speak... privately."

Lan Xia blinked slowly but then waved a hand dismissively. "I'm sorry, but I'm in the middle of something more important."

The Third Prince's gaze flicked to Mark, who was silently watching the exchange while slowly chewing on the berry.

Lan Xia stood, brushing down her robes. "Allow me to introduce you," she said with a bright but unmistakably sharp tone. "This is Lu Zhen. My soon-to-be-husband."

The Prince furrowed his brows. "Husband?" As his gaze once again shifted to Mark, he spoke, "Lu Zhen? I know who you are. The one who humiliated my younger brother... it's you, isn't it?"

Chapter 683: A Barbaric Challenge

The air in the courtyard grew still as the Fourteenth Prince turned toward Mark. "I've heard about you," he said coldly. "The grandson of the traitor, Lan Gengxin. The one blessed by both the Phoenix and the Blizzard Pegasus. Heard that you are as strong as experts above your cultivation realm. I want to see whether those rumors are true or not. Care to spar with me?"

Mark looked at him, blinking slowly. 'Was this guy serious?'

In what universe did it make sense to throw a challenge at someone the moment you met them?

He studied the prince for a second—ornate imperial robes, a polished longsword strapped to his waist, and a smug confidence that screamed: I've never lost in my life. Mark's brows rose, finding it awfully familiar. He faced such people on his home planet. 'Regardless of whether one is a mortal or an immortal, lower or higher world, something just doesn't change.' He thought.

Right then, he glanced at Lan Xia, whose lips twitched slightly.

'Don't tell me it's about her?' Mark realized. 'Of course it is. These people really live in ancient times, don't they? Just walking around challenging people like it's a sport.'

Just as Mark was wondering how to respond to this challenge, Lan Xia stepped forward, folding her arms and staring the prince down. "Don't fight my fiancé, Your Highness. You're not a match for him."

The Fourteenth Prince flinched as if slapped. His jaw tightened, and his nostrils flared. "What did you say? Are you saying he is a match for me? A first-stage transcendent who is near to the second stage?"

"My husband is just a Transcendent, yes," Lan Xia replied casually. "And you're a First Stage Transcendent. But honestly? You wouldn't even bring out a tenth of his strength."

A hush fell over the courtyard.

The prince's face darkened with shame and fury. His eyes darted toward Mark, burning with bruised pride.

"You..." he spat. "Come and fight me. Right now!"

Lan Xia gave Mark a pat on the arm and stepped aside, murmuring but not in a low tone either. "Don't kill him, though. The Emperor is going to be all mad. This fellow is worthless, but he had his father as backing."

"Lan Xia..." The Prince's face reddened, feeling insulted by her remark. The killing intent suddenly flared in his eyes.

Mark turned to her with a side glare, catching the mischievous smirk she was trying very hard to hide. 'You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?'

With a heavy sigh, Mark cracked his neck and walked past the prince without even acknowledging him. "Alright," he said. "Let's go to the training grounds. Might as well stretch a little before breakfast."

The prince bristled at the casual tone, following him in seething silence. Lan Xia followed behind, her hands clasped behind her back, and a bounce in her step.

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The training ground was soon surrounded by disciples, elders, and curious onlookers.

The moment word got out that the Fourteenth Prince of the Heavenly Ocean Empire had challenged someone to a duel—and that someone was Lan Zhen—the sect buzzed like a stirred beehive.

Whispers spread like wildfire.

"Why was the Prince challenging this Devil?"

"But he's just a newly promoted Transcendent, isn't he?" "Seriously? Didn't you know about him or something? When he was only an ascendant, he defeated the transcendant and dared to offend even a grand elder. And now, he is a transcendant."

"Look at him... he's so calm."

"Pity the prince. Doesn't know what he's walking into."

"But Lan Zhen will not kill the prince, right?"

"Considering his personality, he might just do that and spark a war with the imperial family."

"I don't think a war will emerge. It's not like his opponent is the fifth prince or something. He isn't that important in the court."

"I heard that he is the brother of the seventeenth prince." "Oh, that trash? He was beaten to death by Lan Zhen."

Those murmurs reached the Fourteenth Prince's ears, and each word stabbed at his pride like tiny needles. His face turned redder by the second. He drew his gleaming longsword in one smooth motion and pointed it at Mark.

"I won't hold back!" he snapped, his voice sharp as the blade he held.

Mark stood on the opposite side, hands tucked in his sleeves, looking almost bored. "You already said that. Five times." Since the other party has already established enmity, He thought he might as well go all the way. Luckily, this will fall in line with his plans, but will come at an earlier date.

Soon, an elder, willing to be a proctor of this match, glanced at both and then raised his hand.

"Begin!"

The prince struck instantly. His figure blurred, wind splitting behind him as he closed the distance with a burst of speed. He slashed down vertically, sending a sharp arc of wind blade straight at Mark's chest.

But Mark stepped aside casually, the blade cutting only air. It entirely missed him.

CLANG!

The prince spun mid-air and brought down his sword again in a sweeping arc. Mark leaned backward, barely an inch between the blade and his nose.

He continued with a rapid flurry—slashes from both sides, thrusts aimed at Mark's throat, knees, and ribs.

Mark didn't raise a hand in retaliation. Instead, he glided between strikes with minimal movement, weaving and slipping around each one like water flowing through cracks.

The spectators' eyes widened. There was an eerie silence in the surroundings.

"Azure Fang Slash!" the prince roared, his blade glowing blue before releasing a five-meter wave of compressed Qi straight at Mark.

Mark sidestepped, letting the attack slice through a stone pillar behind him.

"Sky Breaker Barrage!" This time, the prince leapt into the air, his sword breaking into dozens of glowing afterimages as he hurled down a storm of strikes like falling meteors.

Mark stepped back. One, two, three...

Each footwork movement was precise, calm, and economical. He turned his body just enough for the attacks to pass him by.

Not a single one touched his robes.

The prince landed, panting, sweat forming at his temples.

"Fight me, damn you!" he shouted. "Stop running like a coward!"

Mark raised a brow. "Running? You're the one swinging wildly like a toddler with a stick."

The crowd snorted in laughter. Some even clapped discreetly. The prince's face darkened further.

"Ocean Dragon Descent!"

A giant serpent-shaped wave of ether burst from his blade and came crashing down toward Mark with ferocious momentum.

Mark exhaled slowly.

He leaned forward and vanished.

"Wha—?!"

Before the prince could react, Mark reappeared a few feet away, walking in a slow circle around him.

"I'm giving you a chance," Mark said coolly. "Admit defeat and we will act as if nothing happened."

The prince clenched his fists. His aura surged, a sharp sea-blue wind bursting from his body. "Chance? You are just a fuc*er who knows how to dodge and hide behind a woman. You lack the guts to face me like a man."

Mark stood there, tilting his head ever so slightly at the comment. The wind struck his body, but he didn't move a bit. "Fine."

Just as the prince charged forward to attack, with a flick of his wrist, Mark drew a sleek weapon from his inventory, the adamantine Desert Eagle.

Before the prince could register what it was...

BANG!

A sharp crack echoed across the training ground.

A spray of blood burst from the prince's thigh. He staggered backward, collapsing onto one knee with a grunt of pain as the adamantine bullet pierced his body.

"What?" he gasped, grabbing at his leg, feeling heavy all of a sudden, and healing powers restricting. "What did you do?"

Mark cocked the gun again with one hand, raising it lazily. "This?" he said, voice almost playful. "The same thing I did to your brother."

BANG!

Another shot—this time hitting the prince square in the shoulder. *Graaaa* He screamed, falling back, face twisted in disbelief and pain.

BANG!

A bullet tore through the prince's palm.

BANG!

One grazed his ankle, spraying blood again.

Mark didn't walk closer. He stood calmly, loading adamantine shots with practiced ease and pulling the trigger without blinking—each one deliberate, each one cruelly placed.

He wasn't striking at the prince's vitals at all.

Mark simply started toying with him around as if he were torturing him. The entire place was filled only with the prince's screams in agony.

Some spectators gasped. Some turned pale. Lan Xia stood quietly in the crowd, eyes unreadable but lips curved ever so slightly. She seemed to be the only one enjoying it.

"Stop this madness!" a voice rang out.

An elder suddenly flew down from the spectator gallery, robes fluttering. His aura burst out—a First Stage Transcendent like the prince—firm and imposing. His name was Elder Wei Zhen, guardian of the internal law enforcement division.

"That's enough, Lan Zhen," he barked. "He's a prince of the Heavenly Ocean Empire! Are you trying to court death?!"

Mark turned to him slowly.

Chapter 684: Mark's declaration

"And what gives you the right to interrupt a sparring session between two contestants?" Mark asked calmly.

Elder Wei's face twitched. "He's unable to continue..."

"Oh? I don't recall him admitting defeat." Mark's voice dropped into a dangerous tone. He raised his gun slightly toward the elder. "If you're so eager, you can join him. Two on one, perhaps?"

Wei Zhen stiffened. Though Mark's cultivation was lower, he knew that he wasn't a match for him either. He only intervened in the hope that others would become motivated to speak up. But no one else did. They all stayed silent.

As a result, Wei Zhen could only remain a silent spectator.

Meanwhile, the prince tried to crawl away while still growling in anger. "I... I'll remember this..."

BANG!

A bullet smashed into his calf.

Argh

"You're not going anywhere," Mark said, stepping forward. "You still haven't said the words."

The prince groaned, trembling now.

Mark stood over him and lowered the gun right to his head. "Now... kneel properly and admit defeat, O Prince of the Great Empire."

The courtyard went deathly silent.

Lan Xia leaned casually against the tree, crossing her arms.

The Fourteenth Prince clenched his bloody hands and teeth, shame burning hotter than the pain.

"Say it," Mark urged again. "Don't worry. I've got all day."

BANG! The bullet grazed his cheek, leaving a bloody line across his face.

"I—I..." the prince stammered, his pride torn to shreds.

Elder Wei Zhen once again stepped in. "That's enough, Lan Zhen. We can't afford to offend the Imperial Family any further. End this, now!"

"Are we really?" Mark replied with a half-smile, turning his head lazily toward Elder Wei Zhen.

The elder blinked, confused by the question.

Mark's eyes gleamed as he tilted his head slightly. "The Blizzard Pegasus, our guardian spirit, didn't it promise to protect the Lan Sect with its life? So, are you truly worried about the imperial palace attempting to exterminate us... or are you just afraid of how fragile their pride is?"

Wei Zhen's face hardened. "Be careful with your words, Mark. You're not some loose cultivator without roots. You're part of this clan and you are a prince... your words..."

"I know that my words represent the " Mark cut in coldly, no longer smiling. "The imperial family thinks they can move us like chess pieces. But the only reason they haven't is because they fear us, even if they won't admit it."

"Watch your tone."

Mark shrugged it off, already bored with the elder's caution. His gaze returned to the prince, who was still trembling in pain and humiliation on the ground.

BANG!

Another gunshot tore through the prince's thigh—again.

"ARRGHHH!"

Gasps rang through the crowd.

"Let's see how long your pride lasts," Mark said nonchalantly, spinning the gun before dismissing it into thin air. A flicker of ether energy shimmered in his palm, then reformed into a new weapon.

This time, he summoned his Anti-Matter Gun.

The crowd went silent.

"What... is that?" murmured someone.

The elder narrowed his eyes. "That's not the same weapon."

"That's his soul weapon, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Mark raised it slowly, aiming it toward the prince's head.

The Fourteenth Prince coughed blood, face twisted in both fury and fear. "You'll pay for this... all of you! Your clan will suffer! My father will..."

BANG!

The prince's words were cut short as the bullet didn't hit his body, but the ground next to his face. Mark didn't shoot any antimatter bullets. It was just an ether bullet, but powerful enough to split a crack in the ground, and the shockwave generated from it knocked the prince sideways.

Mark then leaned forward slightly, lowering his tone. "Shut up."

Mark continued. "If I wanted to, you'd already be dead. The only reason you're breathing is because someone asked me not to kill you."

His eyes flickered to Lan Xia, who gave him an innocent blink in return. "But I wonder... what if I stop listening to her?"

The prince froze, paralyzed by the words. His pride was already shattered—his body bleeding, his ego humiliated. Now he couldn't even speak without fear of being executed in front of dozens.

Elder Wei Zhen took a deep breath. "That's enough."

"You... you... You can't kill me. Stop bluffing." The prince said, already trying to crawl back a little bit. "The Blizzard Pegasus might be powerful, but it is certainly not a match for the might of the Empire. If you kill me, my father will make sure to bury you and the clan into the ground. At best, you can torture but can't kill me."

Mark, however, calmly responded by grabbing his collar and placing it at the prince's forehead, at point-blank range. "Sure, the imperial palace might punish us. They might wage a war against us. They might destroy us," he said, his tone devoid of any sympathy. "But what about you?"

Glancing at his gun, Mark continued. "This gun isn't just here to threaten you or injure you, Your Highness. This gun is special. It can obliterate one's soul. That means when I kill you, you don't just die. You will lose the ability to resurrect or even reincarnate. You will cease to exist forever. What will you get out of my clan's extinction without you being there to know whether it happened or not? And it is not like you are some favorite heir to the throne. The fact that you are used as a messenger itself indicates that your dear father is prepared for your death."

The prince's eyes widened. His body tensed, fear creeping into his features. Mark's words cut deeper than any blow he had taken so far.

Mark's eyes bore into the prince, the darkness in his gaze making the prince tremble. "I'm asking you, do you think it is worth protecting your pride? Now, I count to 3, after that, I will shoot."

The prince's breath caught. His body, battered and humiliated, could no longer maintain its defiance.

"1"

His anger crumbled beneath the weight of Mark's words.

"2"

Slowly, unwillingly, the Third Prince sank to his knees, his pride completely shattered.

"Three.."

"I admit defeat," he said in a whisper, barely audible.

Mark smiled, a satisfied, almost pitying grin. He lowered the gun and dismissed it with a flick of his wrist. "Good choice," he said simply. "Now go crawl back to your palace."

With a last glance at the prince, Mark turned and walked away. The crowd parted, eyes wide with awe, fear, and respect. The prince, broken and humiliated, could only watch as Mark left the courtyard.

Lan Xia smirked, continuing to cross her arms. "Now that's my future husband, someone with guts and someone who is different from the rest."

Later that Day...

Mark was summoned to the Sect's Elder Council. He entered the grand hall, his footsteps echoing across the polished stone floor. Elder Wei Zhen, Lan Yujian, and the rest of the council sat in their seats, their eyes fixed on him.

The atmosphere was tense. No one spoke as Mark stood before them, waiting for the verdict.

Lan Yujian was the first to break the silence. "Lan Zhen," he began using Mark's full name instead of any affectionate term like he usually does. "You know why we've called you here. What you did to the Prince... that's not something we can ignore."

Mark, however, crossed his arms and replied. "Oh, shut it, if it is something you can't ignore, you would have already stopped it. You know that he deserved it. Moreover, he was the one who challenged me and used insulting words against me. I can't let him get away without facing any consequences just because he is a prince." Taking a pause, Mark added. "Also, I heard about the order from the Imperial Palace. It's too overbearing. Once I become the Clan Head, the first thing I'll do is make sure this clan becomes independent. If the Emperor doesn't respect us, we won't respect him or his authority either."

The room was silent for a moment. The elders exchanged glances, clearly conflicted.

Many of them were in agreement with Mark's opinion. They indeed were angry at how the Emperor ordered them to go to war with the Ravagers. Regardless of the result, every elder in the room was aware that after the war, the Lan Sect's influence and strength would dwindle to half. That is why no one even wanted to come and intervene in the battle. They secretly enjoyed the prince getting tortured in pain.

However, at the same time, they knew the strength of the Imperial family too. They were now afraid of the consequences. What is it going to be?

Lan Yujian leaned forward, his fingers steepled in front of him. "You're becoming more of a challenge with every passing day, Lan Zhen."

Mark didn't flinch as he'd expected.

Now, if his great-grandfather expels him, Mark would challenge his authority.

But to his surprise, Lan Yujian's expression changed. The clan leader's gaze grew more calculating, almost approving.

"You have become quite the force to reckon with," Lan Yujian said slowly. "And you've been pushing against the established order at every turn. It seems only fitting that you should face a true test of your strength."

Mark blinked, understanding where this was going. "Eh? You mean..."

Lan Yujian stood up, his tone shifting to calmness once again. "Since you're so confident in becoming a clan head, how about a challenge with me then?"

Mark's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Lan Yujian's eyes gleamed. "I will battle you. If you survive for five minutes, we will consider this matter closed, and you will continue maintain your position as heir to the clan. But if you fail to withstand me, we will show the Imperial Palace that we are making an example of you. You will be sent back to your mortal realm, and you will no longer be part of this clan."

"Hmm?"

Chapter 685: A Battle against Sect Head

Three days passed, and the air within the Sect grounds grew thick with anticipation.

Inside the Celestial Arena, all inner and outer disciples gathered, murmuring among themselves, unable to hide their curiosity and nervousness. Elders took their seats in the high pavilions, and the Imperial Envoy, dressed in royal robes adorned with the crest of the Heavenly Ocean Empire, sat in solemn silence on a gilded platform.

One might wonder why the Envoy was here.

Well, he was here on the orders of the Emperor to spectate the battle in order to confirm that the Sect Head won't be holding back against Mark for those five minutes of battle. And this is not a false battle.

If Mark could withstand five minutes against a third-stage Transcendant, then the Envoy would invite Mark to the imperial palace to bury any grudges the prince had with him. If not, the Envoy must ensure that Mark gets expelled from the Sect.

Back in the Arena, Mark stood alone, clad in black attire without any armor. Opposite him stood Lan Yujian, Mark's great-grandfather — his silver-white robe rippling as the cold wind circled him.

As the tension reached its peak, Lan Yujian spoke with calm authority.

"This is your last chance, Lan Zhen. The Imperial Envoy is also here. You can offer an earnest apology, and we can end this with dignity."

Mark looked around the arena once, locking eyes with Lan Xia and then the envoy. Then he turned to his great-grandfather and smirked. "The moment I offer an apology, it will end with losing my dignity, Great Grandfather."

Taking a pause, he continued. "I have a counteroffer. If I win this battle, I want the right to become Sect Head immediately. No stupid trials. No council. No vote. Just your full power and leadership transferred to me."

The crowd broke into shocked gasps.

Lan Yujian raised a brow, more amused than offended.

"You're a newly ascended transcendent. Defeating someone at the first stage is one thing, but you do realize I'm three stages above you. Forget about winning this battle, you can't even hurt a single strand of my hair. Don't be arrogant, boy."

Mark shrugged, as though he wasn't just challenging the patriarch of one of the greatest sects in the empire in front of the imperial envoy. "Then what's the harm in accepting the challenge..." He widened his lips, curling into a smirk. "Unless you think there is a chance that you might lose."

Lan Yujian narrowed his eyes, the glint of ice forming in them. "Fine. Let's change the terms of the fight. I will not attack you. For the next minutes, I'll protect myself with a barrier. Break that barrier and reach me. If you can do that, I will announce your succession immediately. But if you can't..." The aura of a 14-circle realm exploded from his body; it was thick and dense, twisting the very air in the surroundings. "You will be expelled right away, and you shall give up on Lan Xia as well."

Lan Xia furrowed his brows in the audience section. But her displeasure only lasted a moment before she went back to the expressionless person she always was.

Soon, the grand elders, one by one, activated a massive protective barrier over the arena, shielding the audience from the devastation to come.

Lan Yujian then raised his palm. A translucent icy dome burst from the ground and encapsulated him in the center of the battlefield, the frost shimmered with formation lines, looking like the ice was alive.

"Begin," the grand elder Qiao Wei announced.

The Duel Begins

Mark immediately pulled out his Adamantine Desert Eagle. The moment it appeared in his hand, he aimed and fired.

BOOM!

The bullet struck the icy dome and... tink. Not even a crack.

He fired again. And again. Each time, the bullet bounced off harmlessly.

Murmurs filled the arena.

Mark's eyes narrowed. "What kind of barrier is this? Adamantine has the greatest piercing power. Ark, analyse the barrier."

*Ding! Analysis complete.

*Ding! The Barrier is created from the life force of the caster, has almost instant self-repairing features, and is capable of blocking any attack that has less than 14.7 stat equivalent.

*Ding! Calculating the energy release: You need an attack that releases the energy of 29 Yotta Joules at impact to shatter the domain.

"Yotta joule?" Mark's eyes widened instantly. "That's too high. I don't think I can achieve that speed without unknown. Let's use Antimatter instead. Regardless of how strong it is, in the end, it is Matter. I can use anti-matter to cause annihilation."

He dismissed the Adamantine gun and summoned the Antimatter Gun this time, hoping to shatter the icy block. As he pulled the trigger, a glowing bullet of void energy surged forward.

ZZZZZ-BOOOM!

The impact disintegrated a portion of the barrier into dust just as he expected, but only a tiny crater was formed before the dome began to regenerate.

He fired again.

And again.

Every shot left a scar, but none deep enough to penetrate. The dome healed rapidly, undoing his progress each time.

The Sect Head remained motionless, seated inside the dome like an emperor atop a frozen throne.

Mark stood silently for a moment, breathing steadily. "Alright. I can see that it is ridiculously strong. Let's achieve the required energy release."

Then, without a word, he dismissed both guns.

Instead, he pulled out a small jewelry-like brocade box, so plain and ordinary in appearance that it confused the crowd. It gave off no aura, no energy signature, nothing.

"What is that?"

"A hidden treasure?"

"No, I can't sense anything from it..."

Only the grand elders looked alarmed, sensing something they couldn't understand.

Mark walked to the edge of the battlefield.

And then...

"Activate, Skill, Gravity Dome. Set at max. 200 meters radius,"

"Activate skill, Density manipulation. Set at max"

*Ding! Increasing the gravitational force in the surroundings by 50,000 times."

*Ding! Increasing the Density of the object by 50,000 times.

BOOM— the ground cracked under his feet as he applied his skill. Sitting inside the barrier, Lan Yujian instantly felt the effects of the new gravitational force, but he looked only slightly pressured. His expression didn't change much except for a twitch.

Meanwhile, the box, made from Void Stone, an indestructible cosmic material, has already weighed over 5.2 billion kilograms on this planet, as this one has 4 times the gravitational force of its home planet. Now, with 50,000 times more density multiplied by 50,000 gravity, its weight pushes into 13 quintillion kg.

However, due to the fact that it is soul-bound to him, it weighed as light as a feather in Mark's hands. He once destroyed Leviathan with this box. Now, he took it out again to defeat his great-grandfather.

"Ark, calculate the required speed."

*Ding! 2112.3 meters per second. That's the speed the object needs to achieve before the impact.

"Mach 6, huh..."

Mark became serious. As he tightened his grip, his veins popped up, his muscles tensed, and he gripped it with both hands, spun in place once like a hammer thrower, and with a savage roar, hurled the box forward at full velocity.

The projectile screamed through the air like a meteor. A split second later...

KAAAAAA-THOOOOOOM!

The entire icy dome shattered like fragile glass on the impact, exploding outward with force that sent shockwaves across the entire arena. Lan Yujian's body was flung into the air like a ragdoll, blasted dozens of meters away. He crashed hard into the ground, leaving a crater beneath him.

It was the same for Mark, too. His Blizzard Wings were quick to erupt out of his body and shield him like a wall, but the force struck him, blasting him away for a few meters, the wings getting damaged in the process.

A single breath passed. Mark got up and stood straight.

Then Lan Yujian coughed, blood dripping from his lips as he struggled to sit up, visibly shaken for the first time in years.

Mark walked slowly toward the center, not saying a word.

The Imperial Envoy stood up from his seat, stunned, as whispers and gasps filled the crowd.

"The hell."

"The unthinkable had happened."

"He had broken through."

"Young Master Lan has won the battle?"

"What was that box?"

"This..."

As the dust settled in the shattered arena, the air turned deathly silent while gasps and murmurs filled all over the arena.

The elders, disciples, and the envoy from the Imperial Palace all stared in stunned disbelief.

Lan Yujian, the revered Sect Head of the Ancient Lan Sect/Azure Frost Sect, what the Empire calls it, a Third Stage Transcendent who is widely respected all over the Empire, lay on the ground, coughing blood. His immaculate robes were torn, his hair disheveled, and his barrier had been utterly annihilated, not through any skill or energy but through brute force.

And standing in the center of it all was Mark.

He didn't say anything at first. He merely walked toward the crater, each step echoing like thunder across the hushed battlefield. In his hand, the brocade box had returned to normal before it disappeared.

Lan Yujian looked up with narrowed eyes. "You... actually broke through it."

Mark didn't respond immediately. Instead, he opened his mouth just enough to say in a low voice, "Great Grandfather, you gave your word. Honor it."

The envoy of the Imperial Palace stepped forward, his expression unreadable. His gaze darted between the fallen Lan Yujian and the composed Mark.

Yujian let out a hoarse chuckle, brushing blood from his lips. "I did. I thought you could only come as far as destroying a chunk of the barrier, let alone..." He forced himself up. "I accept it. From this day forward... You are the Patriarch of the Ancient Lan Sect."

Chapter 686: Coronation Ceremony

The day after Mark's shocking victory in the arena, the atmosphere in the sect had yet to settle. Whispers filled the air as disciples looked at him with a mix of awe and wariness. He was no longer just the grandson of a traitor and the man with the blessing of the Phoenix and Blizzard Pegasus; he was now the sect head, a title that carried weight, legacy, and responsibility.

Mark was in his residence, meditating. He was going through his plans over and over again in his head. But a soft knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Come in," he called.

The door creaked open, revealing Lan Xia standing in the doorway. Her eyes held a knowing warmth as she stepped inside, closing the door behind her. Her presence was a welcome balm to the chaos swirling around him.

Mark smiled faintly as she approached and sat down on a cushion across from him. He gestured toward the small table where a pot of freshly brewed tea sat. "Tea?"

Lan Xia nodded, and Mark poured the hot liquid into two cups. They sat in silence for a moment, each savoring the warmth of the tea. It was the kind of quiet companionship that neither of them needed to speak to understand. But after a few moments, Lan Xia broke the silence.

"So," she began, her voice steady, "now that you've become the Sect Head, what are your plans?"

Mark placed his cup down, his fingers tracing the rim of the porcelain. He leaned back slightly, his expression unreadable as he glanced at Lan Xia.

"Well," he started slowly, "I have a few plans, and they are... quite bold." He turned his gaze to meet hers, his eyes dark with determination. "But they're only possible if I have your support."

Lan Xia smiled softly, her gaze steady and unwavering. "Whatever you say, husband. You have my support, always."

The sincerity in her voice hit him harder than he expected, a knot of gratitude forming in his chest. With Lan Xia by his side, he felt like there was nothing he couldn't achieve.

Taking a deep breath, Mark then spoke of his plan. "You see... tomorrow, after the coronation ceremony, I plan to..."

As Lan Xia kept on listening, her facial expression changed from surprise to shock, and then to a frown, finally struck by panic.

"You really plan on doing this?"

Mark shrugged, "So, do I have your support?"

Lan Xia let out a heavy sigh in the end. "I know that you aren't the type to take a gamble over an unknown result. I'm going to trust you that you know what you were doing."

Mark let out a smile. "Thank you."

The next morning, as the sun cast golden rays across the sect, a knock echoed at Mark's door again.

This time, it was the Imperial Envoy who had come to deliver his message. The man was dressed in the regal robes of the Heavenly Ocean Empire, his demeanor stiff and formal as he stepped into Mark's residence.

He handed over a sealed scroll, the emblem of the Imperial Palace embossed on the front.

"This," the envoy said with a solemn tone, "is an invitation to the Imperial Banquet. His Majesty, the Emperor, requests your presence."

Mark took the scroll but did not open it. Instead, he eyed the envoy with a bemused expression. The envoy waited, unsure whether to speak.

Mark raised an eyebrow and calmly set the scroll back on the table.

"You can keep this invitation for now," Mark said, his voice even. "Wait for the coronation ceremony. After that, hand it to me then."

The envoy blinked in confusion. "What do you mean? This invitation is for your presence now—His Majesty has already given his blessing for you to attend."

Mark leaned forward, his voice sharp with subtle authority. "No. You've had that scroll with you since yesterday, yet you didn't give it to me until now. That tells me one thing."

The envoy frowned, unsure of what Mark was getting at.

"You didn't hand it over immediately because you were waiting for the outcome of the battle," Mark continued, his gaze piercing. "If I had lost, I'd have been seen as unworthy. Perhaps the invitation would have been a formality, a way to bury the hatchet with the Fourth Prince. Or worse, perhaps it was meant to force me to apologize to him in front of the Emperor."

The envoy's expression faltered, but he said nothing.

Mark's smile grew colder. "But now that I'm the Head of Ancient Lan Sect, the leader of the Azure Frost Dominion, the invitation doesn't come to Lan Zhen; it comes to the Sect Leader. And the Sect Leader doesn't bow to any royal authority, not even to the Third-Stage Transcendent who thinks he's untouchable."

The envoy shifted uncomfortably, the weight of Mark's words sinking in.

Mark continued. "So, go back to your superiors, consult them. Decide whether you want to give me this invitation or not. But know this: if you give it to me now, it will be at my terms, not theirs."

The envoy stood in stunned silence for a moment. He clearly didn't expect such boldness from the newly ascended sect head. His lips parted to speak, but no words came out. He looked at Mark, the tension hanging between them like a thick fog.

Mark stood up slowly, his gaze steady. "You may leave now. And remember... the invitation depends on the outcome of the coronation."

The envoy bowed stiffly, though his expression was tight with a mix of disbelief and respect. He turned and walked out, leaving Mark alone with his thoughts.

Once the envoy left, Mark stood by the window, staring out at the vast expanse of the Azure Frost Dominion stretching out before him. The Sect was his, but that wasn't enough. He needed more. He needed to expand his influence, to protect his family and create a future for them in this turbulent world.

The morning of the coronation ceremony was bathed in the golden light of dawn, a rare, auspicious sight that seemed to promise a new beginning for the Lan Clan. The air hummed with anticipation as the clan prepared for the momentous occasion—the installation of a new Clan Head, Mark, who had, in a short span of time, claimed both the title and the respect of all within the sect.

The grand courtyard of the Lan Clan was filled with guests from far and wide, each arriving to witness the elevation of the new Clan Head, who recently became the Clan heir.

The marble ground gleamed under the clear skies, and banners of azure and silver fluttered from every pillar and archway. Ornate lanterns adorned the sides, casting a faint golden glow that seemed to shimmer with the power of the moment.

This wasn't just a coronation; for the sect disciples, it was the beginning of a new era.

Mark stood at the central stage, wearing the ceremonial robes of the Clan. The Blizzard Pegasus emblem on his chest shone brilliantly in the sun, catching the light and reflecting it back onto the gathered crowd.

The ceremony followed the old traditions.

At the far end of the courtyard, the Sect Head, Lan Yujin, stood with the rest of the Elder Council, his face calm but stern. His hands were clasped behind his back, eyes forward, and his posture was one of deep respect for the customs of his clan. Beside him stood Lan Yuxuan, the Grand Elder, her eyes sharp and observant, betraying no emotion as she watched Mark prepare for his swearing-in.

Around them, the other Clan Heads of the Azure Frost Dominion had gathered, dressed in elaborate robes that bore their clan's colors and sigils. They sat in a semicircle, some chatting in low voices, others meditating in preparation for the ceremony.

Mark stood before an ancient altar made of white jade. In the center of the altar, a glowing ice crystal stood, glowing brightly under the sunlight.

The Ceremony began with Lan Yujin stepping forward while holding a jade scroll in his hands, the scroll that would mark the official transfer of power. The Clan Head's Mantle, once worn by him, was draped over his arm.

"Lan Zhen, son of Lan Jingyi, grandson of Lan Gengxin, and the direct descendant of Lan Yujin," Lan Yujin intoned, his voice carrying through the courtyard, "you stand before us today not just as a warrior, not just as the bearer of ancient blood, but as a man who has earned the right to lead this clan."

Mark bowed his head respectfully, his expression calm, betraying none of the intensity that swirled within him.

With a slow and deliberate motion, Lan Yujin unrolled the jade scroll and read aloud the ancient oath of leadership. His voice resonated with power, echoing the weight of the Clan's history.

"I, Lan Yujin, Head of the Ancient Lan Sect and the leader of Azure Frost Dominion, do hereby swear before the heavens, the earth, and the ancestors, that this man, Lan Zhen, will hold dominion over our people. With his strength, wisdom, and the blessings of the Blizzard Pegasus, he shall lead us into the future. May his rule be guided by honor, and may the strength of our ancestors protect him in his journey."

As the words were spoken, Mark's heart thundered in his chest, but his face remained serene.

Lan Yujin then turned to the gathered clan heads and elders. "Do any of you dispute this?"

The elders exchanged glances, some nodding in agreement, while others remained silent, their approval—or disapproval—hidden behind their stoic expressions.

Chapter 687: Mark's three orders as the Clan Head

When no objections were raised, Lan Yujin placed the Clan Head's Mantle on Mark's shoulders, a heavy, intricately embroidered robe that symbolized the weight of leadership.

"You are the Clan Head," Lan Yujin said. "Do you accept this position?"

Mark's voice rang clear and strong as he answered, "I do."

Lan Yujin nodded, and the crowd erupted in a slow, steady applause as the final step of the coronation ceremony concluded.

As the ceremony was coming to an end, a figure stood at the far end of the courtyard, wearing the unmistakable garb of the Imperial Envoy. The familiar figure had arrived earlier and had watched the entire ceremony in silence.

Mark's eyes flickered over to the envoy, glancing at the scroll in his hand. It became obvious to Mark that the Imperial Palace indeed decided to invite him formally.

As the final applause died down, the Imperial Envoy stepped forward as Mark expected. His movements were graceful and controlled as he approached Mark, bowing deeply.

"Clan Head Lan," the envoy said in a formal tone, "The Emperor has allowed me to attend your coronation as a sign of his recognition of your new position. He also sends his congratulations."

Mark nodded, offering a small, respectful bow in return. But there was no warmth in his smile. "Thank you," He replied coolly. "Although I expected someone from the imperial family as the envoy to congratulate me."

The envoy's eyes darkened at Mark's tone, but he said nothing. After all, he knew that the Imperial Palace had its eyes on Mark for future collaboration.

"His Majesty," the envoy responded calmly by pushing forth the scroll he was carrying, "has invited you to the Imperial Banquet in three days. There, you will have the opportunity to meet with him personally, and your clan's future will be discussed. Consider this an opportunity to establish your position with the Empire."

Mark nodded once more, but said nothing. "I will think about it," he said instead with a voice devoid of emotion.

The envoy frowned for a moment, but he could only bow again before stepping back into the crowd.

Polite applause rippled through the hall as Mark sat down at the Clan Head Seat while Lan Yujin stepped away. Looking at everyone who was expecting a few words, Mark's first act as Clan Head was to lift a hand, cutting the noise short. His voice rang clear across the hall.

"I have no long speeches. I have but three orders."

The guests exchanged puzzled looks. Elders shifted uncomfortably, as if sensing something ominous.

"First," Mark declared, his gaze sweeping over the envoy, "the Ancient Lan Sect no longer abides by the orders of the Heavenly Ocean Empire. From this day onward, we are independent."

"Wha..."

The silence that followed was like thunder. Gasps broke out among the guests. Several elders straightened so abruptly that their chairs scraped across the floor.

The imperial envoy shot to his feet and was the first to react. "What nonsense is this? You would—"

Mark's calm eyes pinned him in place. "Sit down, envoy. This isn't the Imperial Palace. Here, you can't run off your mouth as you wish." After a pause, he went back to address the guests and his shocked clan members. "The war against the Ravagers has nothing to do with us, but the Emperor is trying to push us, not because he has trust in us or something. It is simply because he was threatened by our increased strength. If it were a few months ago, neither the Lan Sect nor the entire Azure Frost Dominion would have had the power to face the might of the palace. But now, with Blizzard Pegasus on our side, we don't lack the strength to defend ourselves. Keeping this in mind, if the Emperor wishes for our friendship, he shall treat us as allies and not servants, not under my rule."

The envoy froze, anger trembling at his jaw, but he could say nothing in front of so many witnesses.

Murmurs swept through the crowd. "Has he gone mad?" "Independence." "Does he think the Emperor will allow this?" "Even if Blizzard Pegasus is strong, can it still go against the entire Imperial Army?"

Mark raised his hand again, silencing them as he continued. "Second. We modernize. No more clinging to outdated ways out of blind tradition. You've all seen the adamantine guns. Lan Xia..."

At his word, Lan Xia stepped forward, carrying long black weapons with gleaming silver barrels. She set them before the clan head. As the air grew heavier, several martial artists frowned, recognizing the foreign, metallic killing tools.

"I don't care what you think of these weapons," Mark said, his voice firm. "If any of you wish, you are welcome to train as Gunmasters. Incorporate our Lan fighting styles with firearms. Adapt, or you'll be left behind."

Some guests scoffed under their breath. An old elder slammed his palm against the arm of his chair. "This is heresy! Our sect's foundation is sword and spear, not these... these barbaric contraptions!"

Mark didn't flinch. "Tradition means nothing if it chains us to weakness."

He let the words linger, cutting deep into the silence, before he gave his third and final command.

"And third—we make peace with the Fire Clans."

This time, the entire hall erupted.

"Impossible!"

"They killed our ancestors!"

"Have you lost your mind?!"

The elders rose in protest, some nearly shouting over one another. Their faces were red with outrage.

"Silence..."

Mark's calm didn't waver. He raised his cup of ceremonial wine and drank it in one go, then set it down with a soft click.

"Their blood feud with us is meaningless. It is old men's hatred, not our future. Before you all shout, I shall remind you that the will of the clan lies with its clan leader. And I intend to make peace with our so-called enemies that the Imperial Palace created in order to lessen our strength. As our clans became bitter enemies, our respective guardians, who were basically siblings born from the same source, have become bitter rivals as well. As the person who inherited both bloodlines, I believe I'm the perfect person to unite our strength.

Under my rule, the Lan Sect will not look backward. We will usher in a new era. And in that era, this realm will revolve around us—not the Emperor, not tradition, and not the shackles of petty wars."

The hall fell into stunned silence. Even the envoy seemed momentarily at a loss.

Mark straightened, his robes catching the light like rippling waves. "This is my decree as Clan Head. Those who follow me will rise with me. Those who resist... are free to leave."

The words hung in the air, heavy and irreversible.

Chapter 688: The Emperor's Command

The imperial capital was a city carved from gold and iron. From miles away, its spires gleamed beneath the sun, and the walls rose like mountains, layered with runes that shimmered faintly with protective light. Beyond the gates, wide avenues stretched endlessly, lined with marble statues of past emperors and heavenly beasts.

The great hall of assembly of the Palace was vast enough to swallow a thousand men. Its high ceiling disappeared into darkness, from which hung banners embroidered with dragons, fluttering in a wind that wasn't there.

On the throne sat the Emperor.

He was an old man by years, yet the weight of his presence crushed the hall like a mountain. His robes were deep crimson stitched with black, the imperial crest glinting gold across his chest. A crown of jade and obsidian rested on his brow.

His gaze was calm, ancient, and sharp enough to strip a man bare of every secret.

Around him stood the royal princes, ministers in long flowing sleeves, and generals in lacquered armor, all arranged in neat lines before the Dragon Throne.

As the doors groaned open, the envoy entered.

His steps were slow, measured, but the slight tremor in his hands betrayed him. The scroll Mark had given him weighed heavily than a boulder. With every step across the polished jade floor, he felt the silence of the court pressing down, as though all eyes sought to peel the truth from his face.

When he finally stopped before the throne, he dropped to his knees, pressing his forehead to the cold stone.
"Your Majesty... I return with a letter from the Lan Clan's new head, Lan Zhen."

The Emperor's voice was like distant thunder, calm but carrying to every corner. "Rise. Speak."

The envoy stood, his legs unsteady. He held out the sealed scroll with both trembling hands. A eunuch stepped forward, took the letter, and carried it up the steps. The Emperor broke the seal himself. His eyes scanned the neat, bold strokes of Mark's handwriting.

The hall waited in breathless silence.

The Eunch read aloud in a steady voice: "From this day forth, the Ancient Lan Sect declares independence from the Heavenly Ocean Empire. We shall not bow to imperial orders, nor bleed for wars that are not ours. If the throne desires peace, we will be allies—but the Lan Clan will not be a servant to the throne, not anymore."

The words echoed, sharp and unyielding. The assembly erupted instantly.

"Arrogance!"

"Treason!"

"Your Majesty, allow me to march at once—"

A minister fell to his knees, robes dragging against the floor. "Such defiance cannot be tolerated! If one clan rises, what stops the others?"

A general slammed his fist to his chest. "Sire, give the command, and I shall personally bring you Lan Zhen's head!"

The Emperor, however, remained still. He rolled the scroll shut with deliberate calm and rested it on his lap. His gaze swept across the hall, and the noise died as quickly as it had risen.

His eyes lingered on the envoy, who bowed so deeply he almost touched the floor. The envoy's heart hammered in his chest.

Then, from the front row, a voice broke through the clamor.

"Father!"

The Fourteenth Prince stepped forward, face twisted with fury. His golden robe shimmered under the hall's light, but his hands were clenched so tightly his knuckles whitened. "This is insolence beyond measure! They dare spit on the throne itself! Give me the command—I will gather my forces and bring their clan to ash. Let me prove my loyalty to you, Father!"

Murmurs rippled through the court. Some ministers nodded in approval. Others remained silent, watching.

The Emperor's gaze shifted, slow and heavy, until it settled upon his son. For a moment, silence stretched thin as silk.

Then the sound came—sharp, thunderous.

SLAP!

The strike sent the prince flying, his body smashing into the carved dragon relief of the wall. He slid down, coughing blood, eyes wide in disbelief. Gasps erupted across the assembly.

"F-Father—"

"Silence!" The Emperor's voice cracked through the hall like lightning. His expression twisted, and for the first time, fury showed in his eyes. "Do you think me blind? This situation is your making. You prodded, you

schemed, you threw a loyal sect into the jaws of Ravagers—and now you dare demand blood when they refuse to be your sacrificial pawns?"

The prince lowered his head, trembling, unable to speak.

The Emperor rose from his throne. His robes unfurled like a storm, and the hall itself seemed to quake. The officials closest to him staggered back instinctively.

Still, some ministers clung to protocol, their voices desperate.

"Your Majesty, the Lan Clan must be punished—"

"Yes, if you let this pass, others will—"

"Enough."

The word was quiet. Almost gentle. But it froze the blood in every man's veins.

The Emperor closed his eyes, and then it came.

A pressure, vast and suffocating, swept across the hall. Invisible yet undeniable, it pressed down on every soul present. Ministers fell to their knees, armor creaked as generals collapsed, eunuchs trembled and gasped for breath. Even the princes staggered, clutching their chests as if a mountain had been dropped upon them.

Magic circles layered upon one another, unfurled like the heavens themselves crashing down. The great banners above rattled, and the jade floor cracked under the strain.

"Do not think for a moment," the Emperor said, his voice reverberating through the suffocating aura, "that the throne cannot crush a mere sect. Their defiance will meet its end, not through your petty demands, but when I decree it so. The Lan Clan's punishment will come, and it will be remembered across centuries."

One by one, the voices of the court were extinguished. None dared speak. None dared even lift their heads.

The Emperor stood tall, gaze sweeping over them all, his realm still bearing down like the weight of the heavens.

"The Crown Prince, heed my command..."

"Your Majesty..." The Eldest of all the Princes, the next to be Emperor, a 13-circle realm Spirit Warrior, a muscled man, came forward and kneeled.

"I will give you the Red Dragon Army... I want you to go on the conquest and eliminate the Ravagers..."

"Eh?"

Chapter 689: Meeting in the dark (need edit)

Azzy smiled, a faint gleam of amusement in his eyes. "You have potential, indeed," he said, voice carrying clearly even across the arena.

He raised his arm, glancing down at the analog watch on his wrist with deliberate slowness. The hands ticked, marking the remaining time. He turned his gaze back to Aya, tilting his head slightly.

"You still have one minute and sixteen seconds of advantage," he said, his voice calm but carrying weight. "Would you like to do anything?"

Aya's white eyes glimmered with determination, her tails flicking aggressively as she crouched low, energy coiling like a spring ready to launch. The crowd leaned forward instinctively, knowing that the next minute would define the intensity of this battle.

The air around the training grounds was tense, thick with anticipation. Aya's chest heaved as she crouched low, white tails coiling behind her like serpents ready to strike. "That... was my strongest attack," she admitted, panting heavily. Her words were almost a whisper carried by the wind, but they carried weight. "I have... nothing else to show."

Azy's calm gaze swept over her briefly, then shifted to Shuichi and the cluster of Minamoto elders observing from outside the barrier. His expression didn't change, but his voice carried the same measured authority. "Lord Fujiwara, there's still time. If you wish to help your clan member, anyone from your clan—any number of you—can come forward to block me and assist her in winning this wager. Should she succeed even then, I will grant your clan a Rank-10 Spirit Core."

A murmur ran through the elders. Some hesitated, subtle flickers of hesitation crossing their faces, as if the sight of Aya's humanoid nine-tailed form had left an indelible impression. A few of the younger men shifted uncomfortably, and whispers spread about how mesmerizing she looked, how the combination of her power and beauty was intoxicating. But Shuichi's expression darkened.

"We don't consider Aya a part of our clan," Shuichi said sharply, stepping forward. His voice carried like a whip across the grounds. "She was expelled long ago because of her immoral behavior—seducing others' wives, destroying marriages, and committing acts for her own amusement. No one from the Minamoto Clan will aid her in order to gain a Spirit Core. Make no mistake: this is not about her or any reward."

He paused, letting his words sink in. The elders' faces hardened, and the temptation in their eyes dimmed under the weight of Shuichi's authority.

Shuichi's gaze then softened just a fraction as he continued. "But, for the sake of preventing a disaster, we cannot allow her to be harmed in this battle. She may be expelled, she may have no honor among us, but she

is still powerful. We will help shield her—not because she is one of us, but to ensure she does not fall into the wrong hands. Mobilize the senior elders. Shield her."

A subtle hum of energy began to ripple across the arena as the senior elders moved into position, their presence radiating authority and power. Even as Aya's form shimmered with residual soul energy, the barrier of human determination—the will of the Minamoto elders—was beginning to form around her, ready to intervene should Azzy move.

Aya's white eyes flickered briefly toward them, her grin returning despite her exhaustion. "Hmph... I didn't expect such courtesy," she muttered, tails flicking in amusement. Yet even as she spoke, a spark of respect glimmered in her eyes for the unity and discipline of her former clan.

Azzy's calm gaze swept across them all, his lips curving into the faintest smile. "Very well," he said softly, almost to himself. "Let's see how this turns out."

The tension thickened. Every spectator held their breath, knowing that the next exchange, even with Aya's allies surrounding her, would decide the outcome of the wager—and the shadow guards' future.

The four Rank-9 elders braced themselves, standing like statues around Aya as the scarlet energy swirled into an intricate lattice, a shimmering barrier that pulsed with raw demigod-level power. Every thread of energy glowed ominously, resonating with the combined might of the four masters. For a moment, it seemed as if even Azzy might hesitate. But he remained unmoved, a calm, confident presence amidst the swirling storm of power.

He glanced at the analog watch on his wrist, noting the seconds ticking past. The elders held firm, channeling all their strength into maintaining the barrier. They didn't attack; their focus was singular—to protect Aya and ensure the wager remained fair. Yet, there was an unspoken tension in the air. Even a barrier this strong could not hold forever against someone of Azzy's caliber.

As the timer ticked past the 270th second, Azzy's lips curved into the faintest of smiles. "Alright," he murmured, voice almost soft, "now, I'll make my move."

Without warning, a strange stillness fell over the arena. The wind froze mid-air, dust hung suspended in the sunlight, and even Aya's nine tails seemed to hang in unnatural suspension. Azzy's voice cut through the silence, barely audible. "Soul skill: Time Stop."

Everything around him came to a complete standstill, locked in a moment that felt eternal. Not a single feather of the fox's fur twitched, not a single breath escaped Aya's lips. The elders' scarlet barrier glimmered and pulsed, frozen in perfect symmetry.

And then, in an instant, Azzy closed the distance. The gap between him and Aya, guarded by the Rank-9 elders, disappeared in the blink of an eye. Time remained frozen for everyone else, but Azzy moved as fluidly as if nothing had changed.

He placed his hand against the scarlet barrier. Slowly, deliberately, he let Death energy seep from his palms. The dark, void-like essence coiled around the lattice of scarlet energy, unraveling it from within. Sparks erupted as threads of the barrier dissolved into nothingness. In a matter of heartbeats, the impenetrable demigod-level defense crumbled completely, leaving Aya exposed.

Azzy stood before her, his form calm and composed, the air humming faintly with the presence of his immense power. A shadowed aura clung to him as he raised his hand, and in the blink of an eye, a gleaming death scythe materialized, the edge gleaming with lethal intent.

He snapped his fingers. The faint, chilling sound reverberated through the frozen world. Even in a time-stopped state, the weight of the action seemed to ripple outward, a silent promise that the next instant would decide everything.

Aya's eyes, frozen in mid-blink, seemed to widen in surprise, even as she remained suspended in the grasp of time itself. The battlefield held its breath, waiting for the inevitable clash that would shatter the frozen moment.

The crowd collectively held their breath as time returned to its natural flow. Dust swirled lazily around the arena, and the scarlet remnants of the barrier dissipated into the air. Gasps echoed from the spectators, even from the senior elders who had stood their ground only moments ago.

Azzy stood before Aya, impossibly calm, the shadowed aura around him barely wavering. His scythe hovered with one edge lightly pressing against her neck, a silent statement of absolute control. Aya remained kneeling, her body tense but her expression unflinching.

Her gaze lifted slowly to meet his, a faint spark of admiration—or perhaps curiosity—glimmering in her eyes. "Is this... the power of a demigod?" she murmured, her voice steady despite the position she was in.

Azzy's eyes met hers evenly, his tone casual but edged with weight. "I don't know your circumstances or your story," he said, "but I know this much—you don't fear death. From what your clan leader said, I can tell you have no attachments. Your power... it makes me think you've never truly committed to anything. No wonder you're bored so easily."

Aya blinked at him, a slight smirk tugging at her lips. "Do I... have a goal?" Azzy asked softly, tilting his head.

Aya shook her head. "No."

Azzy's lips curved slightly. "How about I give you one?" His scythe retracted slowly, though his presence remained commanding. "Try to become the Shadow Guard Commander. If you succeed... if you actually manage it, I'll grant you a Rank-10 Spirit Core. And not just that—you'll face opponents strong enough to make you actually feel challenged, strong enough that boredom will become a memory. Do you want to try?"

Aya's eyes flickered with thought, her tails twitching slightly behind her in restrained anticipation. Azzy didn't wait for her answer. With a controlled motion, he raised the head of the scythe and struck firmly against her chest. Aya gasped sharply, coughing up a mouthful of blood as a small, precise hole appeared between her breasts. The impact was enough to pin the reality of her wager in front of everyone without unnecessary brutality.

She fell to the ground, the wound stark against her white fur. Yet even in that moment, Azzy did not waver. Raising his hand, a faint golden glow gathered at Aya's forehead. A life jewel formed, pulsing with steady energy. Slowly, deliberately, he released life force into her, mending the wound in an instant. The hole closed seamlessly, and Aya's labored breath steadied as if the strike had never happened.

Chapter 690: Wedding plans (need edit)

Azzy smiled, a faint gleam of amusement in his eyes. "You have potential, indeed," he said, voice carrying clearly even across the arena.

He raised his arm, glancing down at the analog watch on his wrist with deliberate slowness. The hands ticked, marking the remaining time. He turned his gaze back to Aya, tilting his head slightly.

"You still have one minute and sixteen seconds of advantage," he said, his voice calm but carrying weight. "Would you like to do anything?"

Aya's white eyes glimmered with determination, her tails flicking aggressively as she crouched low, energy coiling like a spring ready to launch. The crowd leaned forward instinctively, knowing that the next minute would define the intensity of this battle.

The air around the training grounds was tense, thick with anticipation. Aya's chest heaved as she crouched low all of a sudden, white tails coiling behind her like serpents ready to strike. "That... was my strongest attack," she admitted, panting heavily. Her words were almost a whisper carried by the wind, but they carried weight. "I have... nothing else to show."

Azzy's calm gaze swept over her briefly, then shifted to Shuichi and the cluster of Minamoto elders observing from outside the barrier. His expression didn't change, but his voice carried the same measured authority. "Lord Fujiwara, there's still time. If you wish to help your clan member, anyone from your clan—any number of you—can come forward to block me and assist her in winning this wager. Should she succeed even then, I will grant your clan a Rank-9 Spirit Core."

A murmur ran through the elders. A rank-9 spirit core is indeed quite tempting. It will surely help someone stuck at peak rank 8 to break through to the Supreme realm, and there are more than a few who were stuck but didn't get the opportunity back when Shuichi selected a few for the breakthrough. And it is not like they have to defeat this mighty demigod. All they have to do is make sure either Aya lands one of the hits on his body or prevent him from hitting her.

A few of the younger men shifted uncomfortably, and whispers spread about how mesmerizing she looked, how the combination of her power and beauty was intoxicating instead of Azzy's dominating performance. But Shuichi's expression darkened.

"We don't consider Aya a part of our clan," Shuichi said sharply in response to Azzy's offer, stepping forward. His voice carried like a whip across the grounds as he further spoke. "She was expelled long ago because of her immoral behavior—seducing others' spouses, destroying marriages, and committing acts for her own amusement. No one from the Minamoto Clan will aid her in order to gain a Spirit Core."

He paused, letting his words sink in. The elders' faces hardened, and the temptation in their eyes dimmed under the weight of Shuichi's authority.

Shuichi's gaze then softened just a fraction as he continued. "But, if she is defeated, it is even more of a disaster. Lord Garcia should have discussed with me or listened to my opinion before issuing such a wager. At no cost, we won't accept her as a shadow guard, someone who will monitor and protect us. For that reason alone, we will help her. However, it is also a pipe dream for her to land a hit against you, but protecting her against you is something within our reach. Mobilize the senior elders. Shield her."

As soon as he passed the order, a subtle hum of energy began to ripple across the arena as the senior elders moved into position, their presence radiating authority and power.

Even as Aya's form shimmered with residual soul energy, the barrier was beginning to form around her, ready to intervene should Azzy move.

Aya's white eyes flickered briefly toward them, her grin returning despite her exhaustion. "Hmph... I didn't expect such courtesy," she muttered, tails flicking in amusement.

Azzy's calm gaze swept across them all, his lips curving into the faintest smile. "Very well," he said softly, almost to himself. "Let's see how this turns out."

The tension thickened. Every spectator held their breath, knowing that the next exchange, even with Aya's allies surrounding her, would decide the outcome of the wager—and the shadow guards' future.

The four Rank-9 elders braced themselves, standing like statues around Aya as the scarlet energy swirled into a shimmering barrier that pulsed with demigod-level power. For a moment, it seemed as if even Azzy was contemplating.

But he only glanced at the analog watch on his wrist, noting the seconds ticking past. The elders held firm, channeling all their strength into maintaining the barrier.

They didn't attack; their focus was singular—to protect Aya and ensure the wager remained fair. Yet, there was an unspoken tension in the air. Even a barrier this strong could not hold forever against someone of

Azzy's caliber. Or so they thought. Hence, they were also prepared to become human shields by unleashing their strongest techniques to block Azzy for the final 30 seconds.

As the timer ticked past the 270th second, Azzy's lips curved into the faintest of smiles at last. "Alright," he murmured, voice almost soft, but it was so powerful that it rang in everyone's ears, "now, I'll make my move."

And then, in an instant, Azzy closed the distance. The gap between him and Aya, guarded by the Rank-9 elders, disappeared in the blink of an eye before his hand was placed against the scarlet barrier.

The elders didn't even get time to react. Before even one second has passed, the death energy erupted from his palms

The dark, void-like essence coiled around the barrier like a serpent at a terrifying pace. Sparks erupted as threads of the barrier dissolved into nothingness. In a matter of that one second, the impenetrable demigod-level defense crumbled completely, leaving Aya exposed.

Azzy stood before her, his form calm and composed, raising his hand. A gleaming death scythe materialized, the edge gleaming with lethal intent.

Aya's eyes, frozen in mid-blink, seemed to widen in surprise, digesting the scenario that was happening right in front of her eyes.

Gasps echoed from the spectators, even from the senior elders who had stood their ground only a moment ago as Azzy's scythe hovered with one edge lightly pressing against her neck, a silent statement of absolute control. At that moment, everyone knew that the match was lost. It ended. No elder tried to make any move as they originally thought. Shuichi, the clan leader, could only shut his eyes for a moment and shake his head in disappointment.

Aya remained kneeling, her body tense but her expression unflinching.

Her gaze lifted slowly to meet his, a faint spark of admiration—or perhaps curiosity—glimmering in her eyes. "Is this... the power of a demigod?" she murmured, her voice steady despite the position she was in.

Azzy's eyes met hers evenly, his tone casual but edged with weight. "I don't know your circumstances or your story," he said, "but I know this much—you don't fear death. From what your clan leader said, I can tell you have no attachments. Your power... it makes me think you've never truly committed to anything. No wonder you're bored so easily. Do you have any last words to say?"

Aya blinked at him, a slight smirk tugging at her lips instead as she knew that he wasn't going to kill her. "Nothing." She replied.

"Do you have a goal?" He asked softly, tilting his head.

Azzy shook her head. "No."

Azzy's lips curved slightly. "How about I give you one?" His scythe retracted slowly, though his presence remained commanding. "Try to become the Shadow Guard Commander. If you succeed... if you actually manage it, I'll grant you a Rank-10 Spirit Core, giving you a way to become a demigod. And not just that—you'll face opponents strong enough to make you actually feel challenged, strong enough that boredom will become a memory. Do you want to try?"

Aya's eyes flickered with thought, her tails twitching slightly behind her in restrained anticipation.

Azzy didn't wait for her answer. With a controlled motion, he raised the head of the scythe and struck firmly against her chest. Aya gasped sharply, coughing up a mouthful of blood as a small, precise hole appeared between her breasts. The impact was enough to pin the reality of her wager in front of everyone without unnecessary brutality.

"Gaah..."

She fell to the ground with a loud scream, the wound stark against her white fur. The elders took a step back in surprise. Shuichi furrowed her brows, clenching his fists instinctively. He might hate his sister who caused trouble for the clan but she is still his sister and he would naturally not want to see her hurt or worse, die, in front of his eyes.

But right then, a faint golden glow gathered at Azzy's forehead. A life jewel formed, pulsing with steady energy. Slowly, deliberately, he released life force into her, mending the wound in an instant. The hole closed seamlessly, and Aya's labored breath steadied as if the strike had never happened.

"Huh?" Aya blinked constantly, feeling the pain removed from her.