

U. Warlord 1151

Chapter 1151: The Night Banquet

"I think you must be mistaken. I didn't nudge you because I wanted to prevent you from intuiting something. After all, to my original form, you're more interesting the stronger you are."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Intuiting a bit of information won't turn them into the likes of Ubbo, surely?"

"Do you know how those wriggling grubs ended up over Ubbo's body?"

"Aren't they cell-like structures from his body?"

Ubbo was particularly large, and the dense carpet of bugs crawling over its body seemed very much like a group of cells.

Nightdemon's mysterious smile made Zhang Lie realize that his original impression was completely mistaken. Thinking back to Ubbo's transformation, Zhang Lie instantly understood what Nightdemon meant.

The transformation to Ubbo's body had resulted from studying the Keys of the Elder Gods. The reason Ubbo hadn't transformed into a small bug, but rather a gigantic bug surrounded by the Keys of the Elder Gods, was because of his overwhelming initial strength.

Zhang Lie didn't dare gamble with the lives of Team Zenith. He immediately awakened the dazed hunters.

Nightdemon warned, "You might know others' names, but it's better not to address any guest by name during the banquet, at risk of tethering yourself to them by karmic links. Ubbo's title is the Null Source; you'd best come up with titles of your own."

Green Flame asked, "Are you all kings of the realm?"

The witch of dreams murmured, "I heard that three new superior worlds emerged among the three thousand worlds, and they even defeated all the original superior worlds of antiquity—along with the king of keys, who's invited every year!"

Green Flame remarked, "They must be impressive if they got rid of even the king of keys..."

The witch of dreams wondered, "Just who managed such a feat?"

Green Flame echoed, "Which superior king among you was so strong as to be able to defeat the king of keys?"

Zhang Lie shook his head. "None of us are superior kings."

Green Flame flared in shock. "None of the new superior kings have been invited?"

Zhang Lie asked, "Are they invited each year?"

Green Flame nodded. "All newly ascended superior kings are invited to the banquet their first year."

The witch of dreams cocked her head. "Why didn't they receive an invitation this year?"

Green Flame continued, "As long as these new superior kings can weather the assault of their established brethren, they'll receive an invitation."

Nightdemon shrugged. "This year's newly ascended superior kings are all a little boring, and that Zongming king's far weaker than the superior kings of antiquity."

After all, all three new superior kings had been fostered by Zhang Lie. Without Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith present, the three new superior worlds would have been crushed by the superior kings of antiquity, and they were naturally weaker than those that could survive against the superior kings' assault unaided.

The witch of dreams asked, "But didn't they take down the king of keys?"

Green Flame added, "If the king of keys is no match for them, how can they be weak?"

Nightdemon patted Zhang Lie's shoulder. "It was this fellow who took down the king of keys—and even after the king of keys had stepped completely through the door of power and was reborn anew. It was an interesting evolution. All was within it, and it was within everything. It was no mere continuity of space and time, but rather the boundless source of life, surpassing all natural law and mathematical logic."

Upon hearing that Zhang Lie had killed the king of keys, and the king of keys' ascended form at that, the witch of dreams and Green Flame couldn't help but look askance at Zhang Lie.

Green Flame remarked, "This year's banquet seems like it'll be quite interesting indeed..."

Nightdemon had been boasting a little, but Zhang Lie couldn't deny that Silver had been evolving toward such a being at the pinnacle of life.

If Silver hadn't been a newborn and commanded greater faculty over its powers, or if it had attempted to kill Zhang Lie from the very beginning, the outcome of the fight could have been very different.

Nightdemon sighed. "It's a pity that I didn't have the opportunity to kill it myself."

Suddenly, a narrow beam of light floated down from up above at an extremely slow rate, as though it was a living being. Strange multi-colored light surrounded it. When it finally struck the ground, it expanded into a cone that could either remain stationary or move to nearby locations.

Upon witnessing the true form of the light, Zhang Lie was stupefied.

It belonged to a high-dimensional realm far beyond what humanity could comprehend. Its body had a defined shape, but that shape was so complicated that it couldn't be determined by eye. Its body was hemispherical and composed of shining metallic cylindrical particles, gray in color.

Those who looked at it had the strange sense that there might have been multiple glowing, sparkling eyes between the cylinders, but no matter from which direction they looked, all they could see was the space delineated by the cylinders.

Its true form was so complicated that eyes were insufficient to uncover it.

The gray of its constituent cylinders was a uniform shade, so it was impossible to distinguish which part of its body was closer, and which farther.

"This is Daoloth, the Parter of Veils." Nightdemon continued introducing the various guests present. "That wriggling bug, with a head on either end of its body, is Noth. It has no title. It once created a species of interdimensional hounds, the Hounds of Tindalos, alongside the Everbearing Lady K'thun."

Nightdemon pointed at the large tree behind Noth, pale gray with black vines hanging down, without any branches or leaves whatsoever. A giant eye was supported on its crown.

Zhou Ying frowned at K'thun, and K'thun's giant eye stared back at her.

Zhou Ying murmured, "I don't like it."

"Why?" Sun Mengmeng asked.

"It feels like it's my natural enemy."

"And there's the leader of the dog pack, the strongest of the interdimensional hounds that K'thun created."

Hong Xi frowned. "It looks like there's nothing there?"

Nightdemon shook his head. "No, don't look at it with your eyes. Focus on your senses, your perception of space."

Everyone immediately tried to do as Nightdemon said. Zhang Lie was first to sense it, quickly followed by Yang Ze.

"What's that?"

An angular, distorted body, with sharp, bony limbs and protrusions from all manner of odd places... Once the hound appeared within their senses, sight quickly followed.

Chapter 1152: Formally Begins

The hound looked rather wolfish, and its body was surrounded by plumes of purplish-black smoke. Now that the hunters of Team Zenith could sense it, they were shocked they hadn't noticed it before.

"Because of its bodily structure and its status as a higher-dimensional being, it can't be detected with the naked eye. The reason all of you were able to glimpse it so easily is because this is the eighteenth layer of space. On the first few layers, even sensing it would be an arduous task."

In other words, in 'ordinary' space, only Zhang Lie and Yang Ze might be able to avoid being killed by a stealth attack.

Nightdemon continued, "That's a mass of amorphous matter that never stops revolving: Cxaxukluth."

"An interesting name," Zhang Lie remarked.

"And that's the world devourer." Nightdemon pointed at a small fireball in the far corner, with three burning flower petals imprinted on its surface.

Yang Ze asked, "It likes to consume stuff?"

Nightdemon nodded. "More or less. It consumes worlds as snacks. It was once the nemesis of the king of keys."

Zhang Lie was very surprised. "Worlds as snacks...?"

Nightdemon clarified, "Its title is the Star Devourer. It used to be famous within the three thousand realms for sucking up worlds within the span of breaths, large and superior ones alike. It once warred with the king of keys."

Yang Ze asked, "Why didn't the superior kings of antiquity band together to take it down?"

Sun Mengmeng added, "Didn't the superior kings of antiquity do so against the death spirit king, too?"

Zhang Lie asked, "Is this fireball less threatening than the death spirit king?"

Nightdemon shrugged. "They did try to fight it off, but they were all defeated easily and forced to flee. Even the king of keys was no match for it. The Star Devourer used to be a very famous entity, one that everyone among the three thousand worlds feared. A three-year-old child would cry upon hearing its name, and adults would be so scared as to lose control of their bowels. It was taboo."

Zhang Lie glanced toward the fist-sized fireball hovering in the middle of the room, unable to imagine the source of its fearsome reputation.

Sun Mengmeng asked, "What happened to it in the end?"

"My main body was persuaded to strike and capture it. I found it interesting, so I kept it around."

Zhang Lie remarked, "Only someone like you would allow it to roam freely..."

Yang Ze asked, "How did you manage to tame it to such an extent that it would happily remain as a small fireball?"

Nightdemon explained, "Yomagn'tho has the intelligence of a child. When the three thousand worlds were created on accident, it treated the worlds like the candy in a candy jar. As long as I fed it a few worlds regularly and suppressed it with absolute strength, it quickly turned obedient."

Nightdemon made it sound simple, but this was something only the king of chaos could have accomplished.

Zhang Lie didn't ask just how the king of chaos had manufactured so many worlds.

Nightdemon pointed at a patch of dark void. "That's the World's Eye."

Seven spherical eyes floated in a circle, each reflecting a different spatial dimension.

"The World's Eye can observe all of spacetime."

Nightdemon then pointed in another direction. "Another entity with unique command of spacetime is the Void God."

A nebulous cloud of green and black fog radiated a dark blue mist, with a black-colored eye of fire in the middle.

"That's Azhorra." The guest that Nightdemon pointed to displayed the characteristics of a slug, a squid, and an insect, and it continuously emitted a rather frightening buzz.

Nightdemon then pointed at an ocean of gray sludge. "That's the Moon of Thousand Faces."

The gray sludge looked like it could very well be the origin of life. It looked featureless at first glance, but on closer inspection, there were small black dots that were like heads, and there were millions of such black dots within the sludge, floating in it. The heads were alive, and their eyes conveyed a tormented pain. Their lips murmured soundless cries, and tears rolled down their sunken cheeks.

A bird-like alien, a salamander-like one, a living amalgamation of rock and metal, a plant—all these aliens evoked a tormented pain.

Nightdemon explained, "Those killed by the Moon of Thousand Faces won't simply die. Their souls will be trapped within the sludge, their heads above it."

Suddenly, a dense, scorching cloud of air drifted toward them, bearing shrill screams and cries that threatened to pierce their eardrums. These weren't the sounds of hell, but rather of a living pile of lava.

As the lava rolled toward them, the voices became clearer. It stopped before the gathered hunters, and a 'mouth' appeared on its surface. It glowed brightly with light, and its 'mouth' asked, "Leader's clone, when will the banquet begin in earnest?"

Nightdemon turned to the lava. "Ah, is it already this late? I expect it'll start soon. Please wait patiently just a while longer."

Nightdemon turned back to Zhang Lie. "That was the Starcore Deity, a particularly strong existence among superior kings."

Clearly, the banquet was about to start, and Nightdemon was speaking rapidly.

"The pool of mercury that keeps dissolving and reconstituting over there is the Infinite Torturer." Nightdemon then pointed in another direction. "That's the Violet Smasher."

A shapeless loop of purple light, roughly the size of a human, emitted electric arcs that caused the air to crackle and pop. Looking at it long enough would reveal a few faint remnants of faces within the light.

"And that's Suc'Naath."

Its appearance was a twisting cyclone, around which spun purple and gold runes. It screeched and scraped shrilly, a nausea-inducing cacophony. Several agonized faces appeared within the cyclone.

Suddenly, an orchestra began to play. The almost-sinister music and understated, barely audible tune nevertheless possessed a sense of majesty.

A band marched into the hall. With twisted claws, the players held long, slender flutes playing madness-inducing tones. The band split up into two paired lines and walked along the border of the hall. As they played, the sinister but majestic music resounded through the hall.

Nightdemon sped up. "It's already time, and there are fewer than ten left. I won't introduce them one by one."

Actually, there were quite a few guests that Nightdemon hadn't introduced yet, like a cloud hovering in the air, a black pus-like unidentified object, a beautiful female surrounded by mirrors, each reflecting a sight that wasn't present, and a yellow-green rock...

Only a hall of this size, almost as large as an entire world, could fit all these strange entities, some of whom were of massive size.

There clearly wasn't enough time for Nightdemon to introduce all the guests; he hurriedly left.

The guests all looked around expectantly. "It's starting, it's starting!"

Chapter 1153: A Rejected Invitation

Subsequently, the hunters heard an even more shrill, even more majestic tone. Compared to the madness-inducing melody of distant violins, it sounded more reassured, more accommodating, with a specific goal in mind—but simultaneously taunting and mocking.

Hong Xi, feeling uncomfortable, clutched her ears tightly, but she suddenly found that the tone seemed to pierce through her soul. Clutching her ears was useless.

The witch of dreams remarked, "Enjoy the banquet."

Her gaze was intent and seemed to convey a deeper meaning. Zhang Lie was just about to ask her to explain when the doors to the great hall were flung open.

Countless servants were furiously banging at formless drums and playing nausea-inducing flutes that only produced a single tone. The guests alongside them began to screech and scream in a crazed manner.

Within the door, there echoed the low, frenzied beat of a madness-inducing drum, the hollow, monotonous howls of a demonic flute. The darkest chaos, filled with an air of destruction, slowly emerged and began to seep into everything.

A kaleidoscopic view appeared before them, revealing a deep abyss filled with black worlds and suns.

All the guests present were staring avidly at the chaos, their eyes filled with awe and reverence. Those weren't the looks of subordinates, but rather of fanatics and zealots, who would be more than willing to sacrifice their lives if need be.

That was the peak of chaos. All paled in comparison to that frightening strength. Just looking at it gave Hong Xi a splitting headache. She unconsciously lowered her head. Zhang Hanxiang felt the same way and didn't dare look at the chaos directly, and the other members of Team Zenith were all affected to some extent.

"How impressive. There are very few guests who are daring enough to look at our leader directly. You must be strong," the witch of dreams murmured.

Zhang Lie explained, "This isn't the first time I'm witnessing him. I did so during the superior kings' meeting as well."

The witch of dreams replied, "That doesn't count. He sealed away a part of his body and attended the meeting. Well, part of his body is sealed away now too, but peeping and looking at him are two different matters entirely."

Yang Ze gaped. "This is only a fraction of his strength?"

Just that fraction was enough to corrupt half the world.

The witch of dreams shrugged. "The leader's main body is in another location in space. He has more important affairs to take care of, so he only ever participates in the banquet with a portion of his body. At any rate, if his whole body were to appear here, all of us would suffer for it."

The king of chaos' strength was such that he could kill a superior king just by standing in front of one.

The king of chaos was draped in what felt like the source of darkness, from deep within the stellar abyss. A gust of cold and the stench of decay swept toward them.

Beside the king of chaos was a massive milky-white blob, with large red eyes the size of rugby balls, supported by skeletal, angular legs with circular suction cups at their base.

It had no arms, just three spines on its back that stabbed deeply into the ground. Its head made one nauseous, formed by layers of layers of some white gelatinous substance, covered in swollen, bulging eyes. At the very center was a massive beak filled with sharp teeth. As the head squelched and wriggled, the bulbous eyes gazed in different directions.

The three back spines moved back and forth like oars, dragging the heavy body forward. The beak opened, releasing a shrill, chaotic screech.

Zhang Lie frowned. "What in the world is that?"

"Don't be rude in front of her. She's the All-Mother, our leader's companion." The witch of dreams gritted her teeth, clearly envious and jealous of her position.

Zhang Lie scrutinized the entity, which looked somewhat like a decaying cloud of mist. At times, that mist would aggregate to form vile organs and limbs, sticky black tentacles, a mouth drooling with saliva, or distorted legs with cloven hooves like those of a goat. Zhang Lie shuddered.

His lips twitched as he remarked, "Your leader truly has unique taste."

The king of chaos turned to Zhang Lie. A discordant note pierced through his eardrums. His words were near-impossible to comprehend, but somehow Zhang Lie understood his meaning: the king of chaos was summoning him.

The king of chaos sent out another garbled transmission, but everyone seemed to be able to parse it.

"Welcome all to my night banquet. I am honored that you would attend. I've invited a few special guests over, nine extremely interesting hunters from the draconian world. They're very strong, and they managed to take down the superior kings of antiquity. Everyone, please treat them kindly and welcome them."

Countless servants were furiously banging at formless drums and playing nausea-inducing flutes that only produced a single tone. The guests alongside them began to screech and scream in a crazed manner, their voices echoing in the great hall.

The king of chaos sent another garbled transmission. "Step forward."

Fearlessly, Zhang Lie strode up to the king of chaos and looked directly at him.

The king of chaos' tone was approving. "Excellent gaze. You're the most unique existence I've ever seen in the third realm."

Upon hearing the king of chaos' evaluation, the guests revealed all sorts of expressions: there were the jealous, the envious, the contemplative, the awed, and the resentful, among others.

The witch of dreams murmured, "I've never heard our leader evaluate someone else as highly."

The king of chaos asked, "Are you interested in being a member of this great hall?"

Zhang Lie rubbed at his temples. "Are you trying to recruit me?"

The king of chaos replied, "You understand me correctly."

Zhang Lie refused him instantly. "I don't intend to become subordinate to another."

The guests were shocked and angry, incensed by the disrespect that Zhang Lie had shown.

However, the king of chaos guffawed. "I don't intend to treat you like a subordinate, just a companion. We can pass through a lonely eternity together, striving for something better, advancing forward all the while."

Zhang Lie replied resolutely, "I'm still very young, and I have companions of my own. I'm not lonely, and no matter how enticing your invitation is, I won't accept. I have my own path forward."

The king of chaos sounded regretful. "What a pity."

Chapter 1154: The Dangerous Arena

The king of chaos then turned to the members of Team Zenith and offered them the same invitation to join him. "And what about all of you?"

Fang Yi blinked in surprise. "Are we so interesting as to be worth your interest, king of chaos?"

The king of chaos guffawed again. "I observed your fights against the superior kings of antiquity and subsequently against the king of keys' subordinates. You're all very special, and I even specially checked your names and abilities. For instance, that's Zhang Lie's disciple, who stands with unwavering strength even against ten million fifth-level beasts alone, with the ability to absorb others' strength."

Hong Xi took a deep breath.

"And you're Fang Yi, with the ability to control karma and to combine many disparate sources of energy, with the ultimate ability of launching a fated blow. And that must be Zhou Ying, possessor of immense vitality; that's Zhang Lie's sister, Zhang Hanxiang, with a very interesting constitution... All of you have unusual and fascinating abilities of your own. The halls of chaos welcome such travelers, and we are naturally interested in gaining new companions."

The king of chaos described all their abilities to some extent.

Zhang Lie commented, "King of chaos, it looks like you've been peeping on us for quite some time."

The king of chaos asked again, "Are any of you interested in joining the halls of chaos?"

Zhang Lie didn't speak. He allowed the members of Team Zenith to make their own choices.

As expected, all of them refused.

Sun Mengmeng spoke for them all. "We thank you for your consideration, king of chaos, but we wish to continue our journey with Zhang Lie for the time being."

None of them intended to follow anyone but Zhang Lie, let alone this mysterious king of chaos. The members of Team Zenith didn't know much about him, only that he was the strongest existence among the three thousand realms, with a large number of entities on the level of superior kings as his subordinates.

However, none of these were sufficient reasons for becoming companions of the king of chaos.

Doing so required at least the most foundational level of trust, but the members of Team Zenith felt no such connection to the king of chaos, or indeed to the aliens of the three thousand worlds at large. The guests stared at Team Zenith with hostility, just as they did at Zhang Lie when he refused the king of chaos' offer.

The aliens of the three thousand worlds respected and revered the strong.

Zhang Lie and his party's firm refusal of the king of chaos' offer was a sign of disrespect.

The king of chaos didn't try to pressure Zhang Lie further. With a discordant huff, he continued, "What a pity. In that case, please enjoy tonight's banquet."

The cacophonous music rang out again. Countless servants were furiously banging at formless drums and playing nausea-inducing flutes that only produced a single tone. The guests alongside them began to dance in a crazed manner.

There was 'food' at the banquet, but somehow Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith had lost their appetite—live black octopuses, soup filled with eyeballs, which looked over at you if you approached, and a speaking fish on a plate. A knife and fork were stabbed into the fish. When a guest came over and cut off a piece of flesh, the fish would scream and trash-talk.

"Hey, you piece of trash! Where are you slicing me? You'd better not cut off anything vital—who knows where you popped out from, if I were to give birth to something like you..."

Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith shuddered, completely unwilling to partake of the food. The witch of dreams stepped toward Zhang Lie. "Would you like to dance?"

Zhang Lie asked, "Aren't men the ones who usually make such a request?"

The witch of dreams retorted, "Were you going to do so?"

Zhang Lie replied, "I don't know how to dance."

"You'll learn by doing."

She took hold of Zhang Lie's arm and dragged him into the dancing arena.

Zhang Lie didn't know how to dance, but at his level of strength and mastery of his body, he was able to pick it up quickly by observing others. Furthermore, there was no designated dance style or form at the king of chaos' banquet—everyone was dancing haphazardly.

However, there was something Zhang Lie had to pay attention to: because of all the chaos, the dancing arena might as well have been a battlefield. As pairs of dancers crossed each other's paths, a moment of lapsed judgment could easily result in serious injury.

The witch of dreams placed Zhang Lie's palm on her slender waist, then leaned in. Her hot breath drifted down Zhang Lie's neck, and her slender waist was lithe and supple. Zhang Lie couldn't help but feel heated—but the moment he reminded himself that beneath this veneer could well be a frightening monster, all interest faded away.

Sun Mengmeng gnashed her teeth. "That odious woman! I've never had Zhang Lie touch me before!"

Sun Xiaowu rolled his eyes. "Sister, that creature isn't even human. I assure you, she stands no chance against you."

As they danced, the witch of dreams whispered in Zhang Lie's ear, "All of you really are quite something, to have rejected the king of chaos' invitation simultaneously. No one has ever refused our leader like this before. Many present had been superior kings, but they chose to give up their worlds to join us."

"What an honor, then."

The witch of dreams smiled and reminisced, "The last time that someone refused our leader was very long ago—it was the king of keys."

Zhang Lie asked, "Will the king of chaos be upset at us?"

The witch of dreams smiled. "Why, are you afraid?"

"Not quite."

As Zhang Lie danced, he had to nimbly avoid the other dancing guests around him. Zhang Lie suspected that they might be blocking his path intentionally on account of his refusal.

The witch of dreams smiled mysteriously. "Don't worry, our leader isn't so petty. However, you'd better be prepared."

Zhang Lie frowned. "What do you mean? You mentioned something similar before as well."

"Do you really think our leader is one to give up so easily?"

Zhang Lie was about to ask for clarification when the music suddenly stopped, as did the dancers. The witch of dreams folded her dress back as she bowed daintily. Zhang Lie hurriedly asked, "What did you mean just now?"

The witch of dreams gave him another meaningful smile. "You'll find out."

Sun Mengmeng also came over to request a dance from him.

However, Zhang Lie shook his head. "The arena's somewhat dangerous."

Sun Mengmeng looked very displeased. "Why didn't you refuse that witch of dreams just now, then? If you don't want to dance with me, tell me directly. I won't force you into it."

"Very well."

Zhang Lie, unable to escape, was forced back into the dancing arena with Sun Mengmeng. Although the dancing arena was dangerous, for some reason, Sun Mengmeng seemed overjoyed during the dance.

Chapter 1155: The True Banquet

Zhang Hanxiang wanted to invite the other members of Team Zenith to dance with her as well, but they all refused her.

If Zhang Lie were to misunderstand something when they danced with his sister...well, they didn't want to get on Zhang Lie's bad side.

The banquet continued for an indeterminable period of time before the king of chaos suddenly made an announcement. "Everyone, if you've had your fill of dancing, it's time for the main event."

The witch of dreams cried out in excitement, "It's here, it's here! The climax!"

All the guests seemed very excited. They made way in the hall, forming a large, empty space in the center.

The king of chaos called out, "Let the true night banquet begin!"

The guests all cheered and howled.

The king of chaos continued, "Zhang Lie, friends, companions, from now on, you'll take center stage. Are you interested in performing for us all?"

Zhang Lie asked, "Is this like a talent show?"

The king of chaos replied, "You're all very strong, with exceptional strength. Do you wish to fight with my companions, with a bet on the line?"

As expected. Zhang Lie glanced at the witch of dreams.

The witch of dreams explained, "Every time the night banquet is hosted, the special guests invited by our leader will spar with us—a form of getting to know one another better, if you will."

The king of chaos promised, "If you win, I'll give you a lavish reward."

"What reward?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

"A wish."

The members of Team Zenith were surprised and rather shaken. A wish was tempting indeed.

"Any wish?" Sun Xiaowu pressed.

The king of chaos clarified, "Of course not, but anything among the three thousand worlds is achievable."

Sun Mengmeng asked, "Reviving the dead, or turning back time?"

The king of chaos stressed, "As I said, as long as it happens within the three thousand worlds, I can do it. If you want me to resurrect someone who perished in the realms beyond, I won't be able to achieve anything. I'm no god, after all."

The king of chaos was willing to grant any wish within the three thousand worlds. Didn't that make him a god of the three thousand worlds, then?

The members of Team Zenith were once again deeply shocked by the king of chaos' strength.

The king of chaos warned, "However, don't try to wish for something too crafty. If someone were to wish for a hundred wishes, I'll treat it as a provocation—and I might just slap you dead."

Zhang Lie asked the most important question. "And what if we lose?"

The king of chaos replied, "It's no punishment. You'll simply have to join us and become our companion."

As expected. The witch of dreams had mentioned that the king of chaos wouldn't give up so easily—and it seemed that this was what she meant.

The witch of dreams whispered, "Our leader's very invested in interesting people, and he insists on securing them as his companions. In some sense, our leader's a collector. Give up on trying to escape."

The king of chaos intoned, "Witch of dreams, even if you lower your voice, I can still hear you."

The witch of dreams mischievously stuck out her tongue.

The king of chaos continued, "Do you intend to participate?"

The witch of dreams replied without any hesitation, "Of course! It's rare enough that a banquet is hosted. Now that there are nine interesting guests, I'll have to participate."

The king of chaos then turned to Zhang Lie. "Zhang Lie, are you and your crew willing to participate in this bet?"

Zhang Lie hesitated.

Although a wish was a particularly strong boon, no companion of the king of chaos was weak. They would surely have outstanding capabilities and all sorts of interesting history, background, and skills. Even the weakest had to be on par with Hong Xi.

The Patient One mocked, "What, don't you dare?"

The Parter of Veils chuckled. "If you don't dare, just join us directly. We won't despise you."

The Everbearing Lady remarked, "Is this the might of the strongest humans?"

Noth cried, "None of the special guests this banquet seem to be worth anything!"

The Lord of Dimensions called out, "If you don't dare take this bet, leave! Don't show your shameful hide around here any longer!"

The Parter of Veils turned to the king of chaos. "Leader, I was mistaken. These cowards have no right to be inducted into our halls."

The Everbearing Lady agreed. "If they're unwilling to fight, then they can hardly grow stronger."

Sun Xiaowu stepped forward. "Who says we don't dare?!"

Zhang Lie hurriedly pulled him back. "Sun Xiaowu, what are you doing?"

Yang Ze walked up to Sun Xiaowu. "Captain, we have our pride."

Li Feng followed suit. "If they're so insistent for a beating, well, I'll deliver."

Sun Mengmeng added, "Count me in. I'm very interested in the wish that the king of chaos promised."

Zhang Hanxiang sighed. "I was one step slower. I wanted to jump out from the very beginning!"

Zhou Ying contemplated, "After all, even if we lose, the only penalty is to join the halls of chaos. I'm not willing, but it's not too harsh a punishment."

Hong Xi nudged Zhou Ying. "Zhou Ying, don't say that! As human hunters trained by none other than Zhang Lie, how can we lose to these aliens from the third realm? We should be thinking of what wishes to get, not of our defeat!"

As everyone stepped forward, Zhang Lie shook his head in exasperation and joined them.

Zhou Ying nodded firmly. "You're quite right. I should think about what to get if I win—a wish is rather tempting, isn't it?"

Zhang Lie's eyes glowed as fighting intent rose all over his body.

Fang Yi spoke for them all. "We'll take this bet. Will those who were mocking us fight us, I wonder?"

The Patient One chuckled. "You think I wouldn't dare fight some puny humans?"

The Parter of Veils continued, "Submit to our combined strength, the strength of the halls of chaos."

The king of chaos looked at the gathered guests. "Very well. Besides them, are any other guests interested in participating?"

Many raised their hands, so many that the king of chaos had to choose the combatants by random selection. In the end, the Star Devourer and Moon of Thousand Faces were chosen.

Zhang Lie asked, "Who'll go first?"

"Let me take the lead." Hong Xi strode forward.

Her opponent was The Patient One.

Hong Xi radiated light as she equipped herself for battle, activating all her combat-oriented soulshards in one fell swoop. A fan of feathers materialized in her left hand, and a moonlit sword in her right. Behind her, multicolored light flared. The domain of [Eclipse] spread out beneath her feet. She walked forward, moonlight radiating from her every move. A black sun appeared behind her, sparking where it touched the moonlight at her feet.

Wind howled. The sword in her right hand gleamed like the radiant moon. As she waved her fan, she summoned a twister in the air. Her sword traced a brilliant arc, launching crescent arcs forward.

The Patient One lifted both hands high up into the air. Darkness rolled toward the two combatants, a dark red color like polluted river water, translucent and cloudy.

Chapter 1156: Special Abilities

The Patient One's attack caused the river water to explode into a flurry of dark red ice crystals that shot toward Hong Xi, who revolved in mid-air and made use of that momentum to wave her fan. Her sword glinted with moonlight, and she shot forward once more, pushing the ice crystals back.

The ice crystals condensed into a whirlpool that tore apart the moonlight from her sword and coalesced into a long javelin. The Patient One tossed the javelin forward.

"[The Hidden Moon]!" The sword slash split the air, sending an argent veil fluttering forward and clashing into the blizzard of dark red ice.

The javelin tore apart the veil and shot toward Hong Xi.

Hong Xi's spirit-fox robe's automatic defense system activated, giving off flames as bright and colorful as the freshest flowers. The dark red crystals were obliterated into powder that burned away in the heat.

From The Patient One's body came countless nightmares, each draped with shiny, oily skin like that of a whale. They each had a pair of horns that curved inward, and their batlike wings flapped without any noise. Their claws were ugly but perfectly suited to grabbing objects, and they had an annoying, spiked tail that swished back and forth meaninglessly.

Most uncomfortable was the fact that they could neither speak nor make any expressions, because they had no faces. Where their faces would have been, there was nothing but smooth skin.

Zhang Hanxiang watched the fight with worry for her friend. She couldn't help but ask, "Just what exactly are those faceless gargoyle-like creatures?"

The witch of dreams had appeared by her side at some point without her realizing it. "Those are nightmares."

Zhang Lie commented, "Any relation to Nightdemon, the king of chaos' clone?"

The witch of dreams replied, "They're similar in name only. Nightdemon's far stronger than these mindless, unintelligent creatures."

Zhang Lie turned to her. "Why are you standing with us so naturally? Aren't you supposed to be with the other side?"

Nightdemon shrugged. "There's only so much space in the hall. It doesn't matter where everyone's standing, does it?"

Zhang Lie turned to Nightdemon next. "And what are you doing here? I thought you weren't going to participate in the banquet."

Nightdemon was unbothered. "Just because I'm not participating doesn't mean that I can't come watch the fight."

"[Syzygy]!" Hong Xi's eyes glowed. Her left eye morphed into a black sun, and her right eye into a silver moon. To her back, a pitch-black sun and a silver moon rose into the air. Their light illuminated the hall. They were linked by a golden thread, which brought the two of them into proximity with each other.

The black sun and silver moon began to merge. The black sun turned a deep red, and the silver moon a rusty red. As they overlapped perfectly, they formed a bright-red wheel of fire, and their corresponding energies combined as well.

The wheel of flame shone with light. Energy coalesced behind Hong Xi's back and formed a crimson sun.

The red light was as bright as blood. The light scattered with Hong Xi as its center, enveloping the nightmares and greatly restricting their movement.

Even The Patient One could sense his strength waning. Meanwhile, the energy of thousands of nightmares was transferred to Hong Xi. Her blood-red light flared and illuminated the hall even more brightly.

With the fan in her left hand, Hong Xi summoned a twister. The blood-red flames of a blood sun burned around her, glowing with heat and blinding light. The blistering temperature caused the ground to turn to lava, and the twister on her left hand sucked the flames up.

The long sword in her right hand gleamed with a red edge, imbued with concentrated scarlet light. Behind her, multicolored light flared. The blood flames merged with her sword energy, causing each of her strikes to leave behind a long trail of fire.

As the flaming, blood-red light swept through the hall, the nightmares screeched and perished. The Patient One flung his arms out, forming a dark-red blizzard—only to have it be melted in an instant by the blood sun's flames.

"[The Hidden Moon]!" Hong Xi's sword arced through the air in a slash of bloody light, bisecting The Patient One and setting him aflame.

Quickly thereafter, The Patient One's body exploded into dark red fluid, which Hong Xi began to evaporate before it could approach her.

Subsequently, the dark red snow and fluid combined to form The Patient One anew.

Everyone appeared to be shocked by this development, even the members of Team Zenith, let alone Hong Xi.

The witch of dreams tutted. "Your companion was truly unlucky to have selected The Patient One as an opponent."

Zhang Lie turned to her. "Is he problematic?"

Yang Ze wondered, "What sort of trick did The Patient One use? Hong Xi's attack did land, but he was able to revive..."

The witch of dreams answered, "Because that isn't his main body."

Nightdemon explained, "The Patient One attacks with his blood. That polluted, dark-red river, along with the flurry of dark-red snow in the air, are all composed of The Patient One's blood. You can think of his 'body' as you see it as a separate entity, though one tethered to his blood."

The witch of dreams added, "If you don't simultaneously destroy his blood and body, you won't be able to kill him in truth."

Yang Ze gaped. "It's that troublesome?"

The witch of dreams nodded. "Without some sort of special ability, no one here could be recruited to the halls of chaos."

Every companion that the king of chaos selected had to have some outstanding capability. Even with sufficient strength, without a unique ability, the king of chaos wouldn't be interested. The guests in this hall had to be the strongest entities among the three thousand worlds, and any of them were stronger than Hong Xi.

The witch of dreams sighed. "She should give up. Your companion might be strong outside, but not within this hall. It's not as though surrender will kill her, either—she'll just have to join the halls of chaos."

Zhang Lie shook his head. "Victory hasn't been decided yet. There's no rush at all."

The witch of dreams frowned. "No matter how she struggles, all your confidence in your companion will turn into despair. Against The Patient One, how does she expect to win?"

"We'll see, won't we? There might be a miracle."

Zhang Lie was fully confident in Hong Xi's abilities.

The witch of dreams roared in laughter. "Haha, a miracle, you say? I never expected to hear that from you. We'll see what sort of miracle occurs, won't we?"

As the nightmares were killed, Hong Xi's strength went down a few levels, but she hadn't contemplated ever giving up.

Chapter 1157: Catching Up to Master

Countless dark red snowflakes danced around the Patient One, each whittled into a sharp blade. They glinted with frosty light under the illumination of the hall. As The Patient One swung his arms downward, the shards fell like raindrops in a storm.

The longsword in Hong Xi's right hand gleamed with a red edge, imbued with concentrated scarlet light.

Bloody moonlight illuminated the void. The counterpoint between the black sun and bloody moon was striking. Behind her, multicolored light flared. She looked like a goddess descending from the heavens. No one dared look straight at her.

A sea of bloody flames manifested around Hong Xi, melting away the frosted blades and burning The Patient One himself.

A field of darkness appeared around Hong Xi. She activated [The Elusive Moon], then activated her superior-grade illusory leopard soulshard to rush forward. Blood-red flames flared up in her wake and swept across the hall.

She struck simultaneously with the fan in her left hand and the sword in her right. The blood sun's flames sprayed out and turned into a hurricane, evaporating the blood-red river water.

The rest of the ice crystals reformed into The Patient One. He raised his hands high into the air, condensing the crystals into a pillar of ice.

Hong Xi slashed forward, and the blood sun's flames consumed the pillar in its entirety.

The pillar of ice suddenly exploded. The resulting storm extinguished the blood sun's flames and struck the hall as a flurry of dark red icicles.

Hong Xi unfolded her peacock fan and sent the icicles flying with a gust.

As she did so, The Patient One himself flew over bearing a huge scythe in his hands.

Hong Xi struck with her sword and met the scythe in a clash, sending a spray of ice all over. Hong Xi's eyes narrowed and sent the ice flying away with a gust of wind from her fan.

She had felt a particularly threatening sensation from those flecks of ice.

The Patient One's scythe suddenly burst apart. Hong Xi wasn't prepared; as her blood sun's sword pierced through The Patient One's chest, the shards of ice that had constituted his scythe penetrated her snowy-white skin and entered her body.

As her soul was devoured, Hong Xi choked on air. Within the blood sun's flames, The Patient One roared in victory, as though the match had been decided.

The witch of dreams murmured, "The match is over."

Everyone turned to her quizzically.

The witch of dreams explained, "The Patient One's blood is a potent poison. It can corrupt the very soul and cause those inflicted with it to asphyxiate." As the blood enters your companion's bloodstream, it'll slowly devour her soul. She'll only have a chance of survival if she heads into water—but of course there's no way The Patient One would allow her to do so."

Regardless, Zhang Lie held to his beliefs. "Hong Xi wouldn't lose to a small quantity of blood."

The witch of dreams blinked in surprise. "You really do trust your companions, don't you?"

Zhang Lie retorted, "This isn't trust, but rather the truth."

The witch of dreams shook her head. "Even so, I recommend that you admit defeat. Your trust will kill your companion."

At that moment, Hong Xi was gasping for breath in the arena, her face pale and contorted with pain. Even the weapons in her hands had fallen to the ground.

With the last remaining specks of ice, The Patient One remade his body and pounced toward Hong Xi.

Just then, blood-red light rose into the air all around Hong Xi, illuminating the hall. Blood-red moonlight swamped The Patient One.

Every guest present was surprised by the sudden reversal of fortunes, and even the witch of dreams was shocked stiff.

Meanwhile, Zhang Lie let out a triumphant smile.

The witch of dreams turned toward him. "What? How could this be?"

Zhang Lie replied, "Having a bit of our souls sucked away wouldn't cause us to lose our combat strength. The Patient One was too impatient, I believe."

The witch of dreams comprehended Zhang Lie's meaning quickly. "You mean that your companion was feigning her pain?"

Yang Ze couldn't help but laugh. "Not completely. She was simply magnifying her original pain and exaggerating her expressions. Unexpectedly, The Patient One was tricked by this ridiculous ploy..."

The witch of dreams sighed. "It's likely been too long since he last fought, especially against an enemy who was weaker. It was simply a moment of carelessness—but this won't happen again."

Sun Mengmeng commented, "Rather than discuss how Hong Xi won, I think we had better save her. Otherwise, she really might die."

The Patient One's poison didn't vanish with his death. Hong Xi crawled toward the edge of the arena in pain.

"That won't be necessary." The king of chaos made his move, rewinding time in the arena. The poison in Hong Xi's body was forced out, and The Patient One, who had perished, was revived.

Zhang Lie praised, "The king of chaos is truly a master of his craft."

Zhang Lie and Fang Yi, who had gained some understanding over time and naturally had intuition over its domain, were the only ones who could truly understand just how remarkable what the king of chaos was doing now was. Even if a human hunter were to devote his entire life to studying time, he might not reach such a height.

Meanwhile, a portion of the king of chaos alone was able to reverse time and revive the dead. Perhaps it wouldn't even be impossible for the king of chaos' main body to reverse the fate of the three thousand worlds.

It was little wonder that he could promise to grant any wish within the three thousand worlds. With this ability, there was nothing he couldn't accomplish.

The Patient One, who had just been revived and didn't have an understanding of the situation, immediately tried to strike upon seeing Hong Xi, but the king of chaos held a hand out and separated the two parties.

"Victory has been decided."

The Patient One immediately understood that the king of chaos had rewound time to save him. "I apologize, Leader, for having been unable to secure a victory for you."

The king of chaos sent out another garbled transmission, but the excitement and happiness in it were evident. "Your fight was exciting, and I'm very pleased with your performance."

"Thank you for your grace, your mercy. May your will penetrate the three thousand worlds."

The Patient One retreated off the arena as the king of chaos turned to Hong Xi. "The victor may reveal her wish."

Hong Xi was startled. "Did I really win?"

She could hardly believe it; after all, the battle had almost grown too arduous even for her.

The king of chaos acknowledged her victory. "Yes. State your wish."

Hong Xi turned to Zhang Lie, a questioning look in her gaze. What should I wish for?

Zhang Lie answered the unspoken question. "This is your victory. You should decide for yourself."

Hong Xi thought for a moment, then turned to the king of chaos. "I'd like to gain the strength to quickly catch up to my master, to become as strong as he is, to be able to fight by his side."

Zhang Lie was very surprised that Hong Xi made such a wish.

The king of chaos was silent for a moment. "I have two different strategies I might employ."

The members of Team Zenith were all very shocked.

Chapter 1158: My Own Path

The members of Team Zenith were all well aware of Zhang Lie's strength, and it seemed impossible that the king of chaos would have two means by which to give Hong Xi an equal portion of that strength.

The members of Team Zenith all listened closely. They too were participating in this bet, and they were interested in seeing just how the king of chaos would grant Hong Xi's wish. After all, not all wishes could be granted.

Some wishes were very easy to state, but hardly easy to grant.

If you were to wish for a million dollars, it was very possible that you might get hit by a car after stepping outside, paralyzing the lower half of your body and receiving a million dollars in compensation from the offending car driver.

If you were to wish for someone to be revived, that person might revive as a zombie.

Depending on the precise manner in which a wish was fulfilled, even a well-intentioned wish could get twisted into something malign.

Being able to choose how a wish was fulfilled nullified many of those concerns, and convinced the members of Team Zenith that this bet wasn't a double-edged sword in disguise.

Presumably, this wasn't the first time that the king of chaos had granted someone's wish, and he was aware that all living beings' thoughts were distinct. As a result, rather than grant the wish as it was stated, he was giving flexibility in contextualizing the wish.

The king of chaos continued, "The first method is for me to directly hand you a portion of my body. That would grant you strength on par with Zhang Lie's, and you would be even stronger than he is within the three thousand worlds, sufficient to become the strongest existence within this realm. However, this method comes with considerable side effects."

"What side effects?" Hong Xi asked.

"If I were to fulfill your wish in this manner, you would essentially have turned into my companion. Because your body has absorbed a piece of mine, you would be forced to remain within the three thousand worlds, without retaining the ability to leave it and return to your own realm. Furthermore, it would be difficult for you to ever reach new heights with this newfound power."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Fulfilling a wish isn't that easy, is it?"

Becoming the strongest entity within the three thousand worlds, at the cost of forever remaining there, without being able to return to the Milky Way or to ascend to the fourth realm... it was a hefty price to pay.

The king of chaos could hardly be blamed for this response, however. If he really wanted to scam Hong Xi, he wouldn't have delineated the pros and cons of doing so so carefully. Instead, if he were to forcefully grant Hong Xi part of his body, he would essentially be converting her into his companion by force—and this wasn't something that Zhang Lie could reverse.

He would even be justified in doing so, considering that Hong Xi had expressed such a wish.

In addition, Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith were yet too weak to defeat the king of chaos, and there would be little they could do.

The king of chaos continued, "The second possibility is for me to transmit several of my insights, compatible with the strength you have demonstrated, directly into your brain. This will significantly enhance your future growth, giving you the potential to be stronger than Zhang Lie."

"And what are the side effects in this case?" Hong Xi asked.

"To some extent, it'll affect your current cultivation, but I'll do my best to find compatible insights for you. I don't expect the side effects to be very strong, nor to be anything but a temporary hindrance. The difference is that you'll have to exert your own energy, strength, and time to digest these insights. Compared to the first approach, this won't be a quick way of granting your wish."

Time and energy—that was the cost.

The first approach could give Hong Xi immediate strength at a steep cost, which Hong Xi naturally couldn't accept. Being barred from advancing into the fourth and fifth realms was equivalent to sealing her path forward, and Hong Xi wasn't interested in this approach.

The second approach, however, would provide Hong Xi with a key with which to unlock a path toward Zhang Lie's strength.

"Forget it, then. My path is mine alone to walk. I would prefer to avoid undue influence." Hong Xi waved a hand and walked to Zhang Lie's side, startling all the guests present.

They all thought Hong Xi a fool, to be unwilling to take the shortcut that had been presented to her. Only Hong Xi knew that she was following her heart, that to accept this shortcut would be going against her own principles for seeking strength.

The king of chaos respected her decision. "Let us continue, then. The next fight."

Noth slowly slithered to the center of the hall, and Zhang Hanxiang stepped forward. "Let me be the next combatant."

Noth pounced over, opening its maw wide. Zhang Hanxiang held her palm up and channeled bitter cold. Cold air froze everything around her. A layer of frost covered the hall, and Noth's teeth were frozen solid. Zhang Hanxiang leapt high into the air and launched a flurry of attacks at Noth, the combined force as fierce as a blizzard. The temperature in the hall dropped dramatically, and a layer of frost covered Noth's body.

Noth roared. Its maw seemed to transform into a dimensional portal. Wisps of black smoke with sparkling eyes, like miniaturized versions of the Lord of Dimensions, emerged from Noth's maw. These were the dimensional hounds that Nightdemon had mentioned, which Noth had created in conjunction with the Everbearing Lady.

A whole pack of dimensional hounds pounced toward Zhang Hanxiang. As the snow fell, Zhang Hanxiang's ice glowed blue. Everything around her began to freeze.

The dimensional hounds teleported through space and appeared all around Zhang Hanxiang, attacking her from different directions and angles, sealing off her path of escape.

Rather than escape, however, Zhang Hanxiang emitted even more frost. All the dimensional hounds around her were frozen solid and transformed into sculptures of ice.

As Noth attacked once more, Zhang Hanxiang skated over the frozen ground, her body as limber and agile as an acrobat's. Blades of ice formed by her feet and sliced apart the frozen hounds. Several blades struck Noth, leaving bloody slashes on its body.

Another pack of dimensional hounds pounced toward her. This time, Zhang Hanxiang clapped her palms together, freezing space and time solid in the hall. Flowers of sleet and ice bloomed over the frosty ground. With even space frozen, the dimensional hounds were unable to teleport. The frost froze them where they stood.

With a wave of her hand, needles of ice formed in the air all around her, then shot down toward Noth and the hounds with deadly speed, freezing Noth's flesh and blood.

As threads of frost glimmered in Zhang Hanxiang's long hair, she punched forward, instantly transforming Noth's gigantic body into a sculpture of ice.

Zhang Hanxiang slowly floated back down to the ground as she canceled her partial transformation.

Zhang Lie praised, "You've grown quite a bit stronger, Hanxiang."

Sun Mengmeng replied, "She's been in quite a few battles by now, and it's natural that her strength would increase."

The witch of dreams murmured, "You were lucky. Noth hates the cold."

After the king of chaos unfroze Noth, he turned toward Zhang Hanxiang. "State your wish, victor."

Zhang Hanxiang had evidently prepared her wish beforehand. "I'd like a hundred superior worlds' worth of energy."

A hundred superior worlds' worth!

Chapter 1159: Dimensional Hounds

Zhang Hanxiang had asked for a hundred superior worlds' worth of energy.

The king of chaos waved a hand, causing a hundred colored orbs to appear before him. Each contained compressed world's energy.

Zhang Hanxiang's wish would really be granted! She had dared to ask for it, and the king of chaos had been willing to grant it.

The king of chaos sent the hundred colored orbs flying toward Zhang Hanxiang, who hugged them all tightly as she happily ran off the stage. "I should have asked for a thousand!"

Sun Mengmeng sighed. "You really chose wisely."

Zhou Ying asked, "Why did you ask for a hundred superior worlds' worth of energy, rather than some method to grow stronger?"

Zhang Hanxiang replied seriously, "This is how I'm going to grow stronger—and not just me, but all of us."

The members of Team Zenith were puzzled until they saw Zhang Hanxiang hand the energy to Zhang Lie.

She continued, "As long as my brother has all this energy at his disposal, he'll easily be able to cultivate more monarch-grade lifeforms. With those genes, we'll all be able to grow strong together."

Zhang Lie rubbed his sister's head as the other hunters' eyes lit up. This was a good strategy indeed!

However, Zhang Lie cut in. "Don't try to get more superior worlds' energy. We have more than enough for all of us—fulfill your own wishes."

The hunters nodded. Zhang Lie turned to the witch of dreams and asked, "How does the king of chaos have so much superior world's energy?"

The witch of dreams replied, "As far as I'm aware, our leader has never lacked for it."

Nightdemon explained, "There are many sources of superior world's energy: some collected and recycled from old worlds as they deteriorate, some produced from the world of primordial chaos when it still existed, and more harvested directly from the higher realms."

Zhang Lie stared. "You can harvest world's energy from higher realms?"

Nightdemon shrugged. "My main body can, at any rate."

While the two of them were talking, the Everbearing Lady had stepped onto the stage. Li Feng was about to join her when Zhou Ying tugged him back and strode out instead. "Hand this one to me. She's my nemesis, and I hers."

As Zhou Ying stepped forward, her long hair fluttered in a spring breeze, the color of crystalline jade. It gave off motes of vitality. She was so beautiful no one could take their eyes away, and golden leaves whirled around her.

Each leaf was like a miniature sun, burning like ash. To her back was a pair of golden wings formed from energy. Above her head was a glowing sun, giving off a radiant, holy light.

The Everbearing Lady's black vines waved in the air. Her huge gray eye stared at Zhou Ying; both combatants could sense that each was the other's natural enemy.

The black vines whipped toward Zhou Ying.

"[Avatar of the Fae: Earthbound Prison]!" As Zhou Ying released all her stored energy, the ground began to quake. The sun at Zhou Ying's back shone with piercing light, illuminating the hall and forcing the guests to avert their eyes.

The ground quaked as thousands of golden wood dragons emerged from the earth, each three hundred meters wide, overwhelming the black vines.

The black vines wrapped around the golden vines and began to absorb their vitality. However, mixed in with that vitality was a portion of solar energy that Zhou Ying had absorbed from the

golden mulberry tree in the world of blazing sun, which countered the Everbearing Lady's power to some extent.

The Everbearing Lady screamed, and her black vines were sent flying as though they had received a terrible electric shock. Her body began to smoke.

Zhou Ying's golden vines were, however, worse for wear. A thick layer of bark had been corroded away by the black vines.

As the golden vines counterattacked, pustule-like fruits fell from the Everbearing Lady's vines. As they landed on the ground, they squelched apart in a burst of rot and decay, showering the golden vines in acid.

From these fruits emerged a pack of dimensional hounds, which tore into the golden vines. However, Zhou Ying's near-endless vitality allowed those vines to restore themselves quickly and bind the hounds instead.

Despite the binding, the hounds were able to leap through dimensions. Within moments, they had appeared by Zhou Ying's side, and attacked her from different directions and angles, sealing off her path of escape.

The dimensional hounds were unable to cause lasting damage to the golden vines, so they had targeted Zhou Ying instead.

However, they had clearly made the wrong decision. Zhou Ying's eyes flashed with frosty light as she swung her dagger through the void.

"[Storm of Leaves: Void Cut]!" A leafstorm manifested into existence around her, each leaf a cutting blade that tore into the hounds' bodies.

The dimensional hounds took damage from Zhou Ying's spatial manipulation, their own specialty.

Zhou Ying was a frighteningly strong combatant at close quarters. She was able to move agilely, and she was a master with the dagger. She gutted the hounds one by one.

The golden vines grew forward and wrapped around the Everbearing Lady.

The Everbearing Lady's vines tunneled into the ground, causing black vegetation to grow out of the floor of the hall. Dark vines emerged from the ground and tangled with Zhou Ying's golden vines, preventing them from approaching.

"[Avatar of the Fae: Worldbound Enclosure]!" In response, Zhou Ying summoned tens of thousands of wood dragons from the grounds, thrice as thick as the vines, their barkskin shining with metallic luster.

The dragons swarmed toward the Everbearing Lady in a golden tide.

The Everbearing Lady's vines and dimensional hounds were completely unable to stop this tide. They were swamped and bound.

The dragons sucked away at the Everbearing Lady's strength. Golden branches grew out of their skin, but the leaves on those branches were gray.

The Everbearing Lady tried to struggle and burrow underground, only to find that the golden dragons had locked off any escape even there. No matter how she tried, she couldn't escape.

As the golden dragons drained her vitality, she had no choice but to do the same to them.

By then, the golden dragons had formed a giant tree, their bodies merging together into a strange, lumpy mass. However, that tree wasn't a pure golden color, but was instead rapidly turning gray. It gave off a moldy, rotten stench.

Zhou Ying stepped toward the tree and touched its bark, which fell apart into rotted wood and revealed the Everbearing Lady within.

The Everbearing Lady, having sucked up too much of the solar energy that was anathema to her being, had black vines now burning with golden flames. Her trunk had thinned by half its radius.

Chapter 1160: An Exchange of Strength

The Everbearing Lady had shrunk to half her original size, but after surviving the trial of the golden dragons, what remained of her seemed to have undergone a significant boost in strength. Her black vines were noticeably quicker.

The tens of thousands of golden dragons had sucked away the superficial layer of her growth, allowing her to refine what remained.

Zhou Ying swung her daggers around her, cutting at the Everbearing Lady's bark with a series of void cuts.

"You're done for!"

As Zhou Ying manipulated her fingers, the storm of gray leaves around her morphed into a hurricane that surrounded the Everbearing Lady. She stomped on the ground, summoning another ten thousand golden dragons to swamp and whip the Everbearing Lady.

The Everbearing Lady struggled again amidst the horde of dragons. Despite her refined strength, she was still in a weakened state, and temporarily unable to escape from the dragons that surrounded her. Zhou Ying thrust forward with her daggers, boring holes into her opponent's bark.

At this point, the match had been all but decided.

The king of chaos announced, "I think we'll stop there. Zhou Ying, you're the victor."

Zhou Ying waved a hand, dispersing the golden dragons and releasing the Everbearing Lady.

The Everbearing Lady had half-wilted, either because she had lost to Zhou Ying or because the golden dragons had sucked away much of her energy.

The witch of dreams gaped. "Your companions really are strong, to have won three consecutive matches."

None of the other guests present would have believed that Zhang Lie's motley crew could win three consecutive fights, but Zhang Lie had accomplished precisely such a feat.

The king of chaos announced, "You are the third victor. State your wish."

Zhou Ying asked, "King of chaos, you promised to grant any wish, correct?"

The king of chaos replied impatiently, "There's no need to confirm it one by one. As I said, I'll be able to grant essentially all wishes restricted to this realm."

Zhou Ying glanced at the Everbearing Lady and asked, "And what if my wish is for you to hurt your companions?"

The king of chaos seemed to understand roughly what Zhou Ying wanted. He sounded surprised. "As far as I know, this is the first time the two of you are interacting. Is that right?"

"Yes, it is."

"You've had no previous enmity or feud—this is your first encounter. Is there a need to go so far?"

Zhou Ying explained, "Your majesty, you may be unaware that I and the Everbearing Lady are natural enemies of each other on a genetic level—and hence that I'll be able to grow stronger if I can absorb her strength."

The king of chaos asked, "Does K'thun need to be killed?"

"No, your majesty," Zhou Ying replied. "I just want to absorb part of the Everbearing Lady's strength."

The king of chaos turned to K'thun. "What do you think, K'thun?"

Indeed, the king of chaos treated his companions like companions, not subordinates.

The Everbearing Lady replied, "I will naturally accede to your orders, my leader, but I have a few conditions of my own."

The king of chaos asked, "What conditions?"

The Everbearing Lady replied, "As this human hunter has stated, she and I are natural enemies. Just as she can grow by absorbing my strength, so too can I grow by absorbing hers. I'd like to propose an exchange of energies."

The king of chaos was silent for a few moments. Zhou Ying spoke again. "I accept these conditions, and am willing to part with a portion of my vitality, but you'll have to exchange for it with superior world's energy."

A portion of her vitality was a minor matter for Zhou Ying, who was overflowing with vitality.

The Everbearing Lady replied, "I'm willing to trade all the superior world's energy in my possession, fifty superior worlds' worth, for a tenth of your strength."

"I accept."

Zhou Ying was delighted. Fifty superior worlds' worth of energy! The Zongming world hadn't even amassed that much energy in total, even after a few years.

Zhang Lie couldn't help but laugh. "If Li Zongming were to learn about this, he might well vomit blood."

He had worked so hard for two or three superior worlds' worth, but Zhou Ying was about to receive fifty for barely any price at all.

Neither did she have to worry about her safety. After all, the king of chaos was overseeing the operation.

If the king of chaos were going to strike them, he would have done so the moment they entered the hall. They might have had reservations about attending the banquet initially, but those reservations were now all but irrelevant.

The king of chaos suggested, "Let me help heal you first, K'thun."

The Everbearing Lady might have been able to perform the exchange of strength as is, but it would be rather dangerous for her, and Zhou Ying wouldn't be able to obtain much strength.

The king of chaos infused part of his own strength into her body, inflating it and elevating her past her peak condition. An aura of chaos suffused her. The Everbearing Lady thanked the king of chaos for his generosity.

The Everbearing Lady's strength had reached new heights with this infusion of energy.

"Zhou Ying will begin absorbing power."

Zhou Ying stepped forward and placed both palms on the Everbearing Lady's bark. The black vines parted for her as golden vines emerged from Zhou Ying's body and came in contact with the Everbearing Lady.

As Zhou Ying absorbed the Everbearing Lady's strength, her long hair turned the color of crystalline jade, and it gave off motes of vitality. She was so beautiful no one could take their eyes away, and golden leaves whirled around her. Gray air seeped out of the tips of her hair.

The gray power gathered around Zhou Ying's forehead, which cracked apart. A gray eye budded from her flesh. It opened up to reveal a chaotic opal iris, which seemed to be able to penetrate flesh, soul, and space.

The gray eye closed again as Zhou Ying pulled back, exhaling deeply. She seemed to have grown significantly stronger.

Despite the limited duration of contact, the Everbearing Lady had returned to her original withered form. It was her turn next.

The Everbearing Lady sent out black tendrils toward Zhou Ying, who extended her hands and transferred roughly a third of her newfound power back to her opponent. The Everbearing Lady glowed with power, green and gold and gray. Her single gray eye was surrounded by motes of green and gold energy, forming a ring of light around it as she screeched shrilly.

The green and gold light burst apart, causing a transformation in her crown.