

U. Warlord 811

Chapter 811: Demons Without End

The demons had rushed onward, unheeding of their lives, believing that everything would end the moment they killed Zhou Ying. However, the Zhou Ying they had found had dispersed into a flurry of leaves, just like that.

It was as though they had been hard at work treasure-hunting, searching and sleuthing for clues along the way, forging forward because of the promise of an amazing treasure lying just ahead. They had a few dicey encounters, lost their loved ones, backstabbed their companions, killed their brothers with their own hands—and when they finally reached the location of the treasure and opened the shining golden doors to the vault, they found... nothing.

There was just a line of text engraved on the walls: "Congratulations, brave warrior. The most valuable treasure is the scenery you saw along the way."

The demons screamed and howled, waving their spiked maces madly as a storm of viridian leaves drowned them all.

The forest shook as a humongous figure, over five meters tall, appeared in sight. His skin was pitch-black, and he held a spiked mace of the same unusual color. The spikes on the mace dripped with poison, and the figure's skin was filled with pustules that gave off a poisonous fog.

The trees it passed by all began to wither—not just the green trees that Zhou Ying had summoned, but even the purplish-black mangroves that had initially belonged to the world. Every step the figure took dissolved tree roots and mud into sticky toxin, like the sludge near a swamp.

Even before it came close, Zhou Ying could sense its frightening aura, as well as a stench so vile it was basically toxic in its own right—as though the figure were a corpse that had been left to rot for weeks on end.

Zhou Ying knew who the figure had to be, then—the primordial great demon.

The leaves rustled around her as she sent them flying toward the figure like daggers, but they began to wilt just by being near the primordial demon, so toxic was the poisonous mist that it was spreading.

No lifeform could get close to it: not the trees, nor even the poisonous bugs that lived within the swamp.

Zhou Ying's [Avatar of the Fae: Earthbound Prison] certainly wouldn't be enough to deal with a foe of this magnitude of strength. Instead, she struck with [Worldbound Enclosure] immediately. Natural energy poured out of her, causing the land to emit a green glow as it began to quake.

Within moments, countless wood dragons emerged from the earth, surrounding the primordial demon among them all. The ebony dragons were dozens of meters long, and their barkskin was covered with golden luster.

With every wave of its mace, the primordial demon sent huge swathes of dragons flying.

More and more dragons emerged and tried to overwhelm the primordial demon, but it was far less clumsy and lumbering than its huge size would suggest. It rapidly waved its mace around and cleared out patch after patch of land and air, sending chips of wood flying all over. Some of the dragons were sturdier than steel, protected by barkskin of surprising resilience.

A regular demon might be unable to break through their defenses, but to the primordial great demon, it might as well have been ordinary bark.

Zhou Ying's forest continued emitting glowing green energy, replenishing her vitality as they processed the nutrients in the soil and turned it into life-giving energy, resurrecting the wood dragons.

The primordial demon's actions suddenly sped up by an order of magnitude, as though someone had pressed a fast-forward button. Its spiked mace swung repeatedly through the air, only to be caught off-guard as a beam of light shot out of the heart of the forest.

The wrist holding the spiked mace had been sliced off entirely by the beam of light, but the primordial demon's hand was already starting to regenerate. Its regenerative ability was even stronger than that of regular demons, and it was easily able to regrow even a cut-off hand. However, by then, the ebony dragons had surrounded it completely.

The primordial demon roared, tearing at the dragons with its arms as it tried to pick up its mace.

Zhou Ying certainly wasn't about to let it succeed. She had a few ebony dragons wrap themselves around the mace and fly off with it into the distance, denying the primordial demon its weapon.

The ebony dragons surrounded the primordial demon like a cocoon even as it continued to resist. As the primordial demon struggled, the cocoon deformed, but the limitless dragons won out in the end. The demon stopped struggling, and black fluid seeped out of the cocoon in huge quantities.

Zhou Ying's verdant forest glimmered with light. Motes of vitality dotted the air like fireflies, then flowed into Zhou Ying.

Suddenly, she glanced up at the sky and frowned. There was no rain of blood from the heavens. According to Zhang Lie, when a king of the realm died, the will of the world would mourn the king's passing, and a rain of blood would fall.

However, nothing had happened after the "death" of this king.

Just as Zhou Ying was contemplating what was happening, another gigantic demon appeared in her line of sight: again five meters tall, again pitch-black, again with a spiked mace coated with poison, again with skin covered with pustules, again releasing poisonous fog...

The demon in front of her was exactly the same as the one she had just defeated, as though it had been cloned. Zhou Ying furrowed her brows, frowning. "Was it just a stronger demon that I defeated, rather than the primordial demon...?"

The new primordial demon pounced toward her, and Zhou Ying retaliated with the same techniques as before, using her ebony dragons. Next, while it was tied down, she zipped through the forest and cut off its head.

So incredible was the demon's regenerative ability that it didn't die immediately even after its head had been severed. Instead, bulbous flesh appeared around the wound, as though the demon was about to grow another head.

Zhou Ying quickly killed the demon with her ebony dragons before it could do so, but the moment it died, another demon appeared over the horizon, exactly the same as before.

She could identify no difference between that demon and the former two she had killed. Two such demons might have been a coincidence, but three meant that something was amiss.

Zhou Ying couldn't distinguish one demon from another, but it was obvious that those three demons were all mirror images of one another.

"Well, we'll see just how many copies of you there are!" Zhou Ying continued to batter down the demons with brute force. Vitality emanated from her, and the purplish-black forest slowly turned green.

More ebony dragons emerged from the soil and trapped the demon, allowing Zhou Ying to kill it.

However, the demons that subsequently appeared were beyond what Zhou Ying could imagine...

Chapter 812: Self-Destruction and Revival

The fourth, the fifth, the sixth demon were dealt with in much the same way as the first three, but the seventh demon managed to block Zhou Ying's lethal blow after it had been trapped by the wood dragons. Fortunately, Zhou Ying was still able to pierce through the demon's head with a quick toss of her dagger.

After that, the demon entered a stage of paralysis as its head tried to regrow, and Zhou Ying successfully killed it then. The eighth demon then appeared, and it too blocked Zhou Ying's blow.

These demons that appeared one after the other seemed to have the exceptional ability to learn from their previous counterparts' death, though they seemed a little slow to pick up on the appropriate counters for the strategies that Zhou Ying was using.

After all, it took them eight tries to learn to block Zhou Ying's single devastating blow.

Of course, part of that reason was that Zhou Ying's sneak attack was both fast and lethal, so much so that it was difficult to avoid or counter even if you knew that the blow was coming.

The demons seemed almost like bosses in a game that had been granted such a statistical advantage over the player that they could never be defeated.

Zhou Ying was certain that these demons had to be a singular entity; there was too much that couldn't be explained otherwise.

Even so, despite the fact that these demons had learned to block Zhou Ying's blow, she was still able to kill them.

The demon swatted Zhou Ying with a palm. Zhou Ying's body split apart into a flurry of leaves, only to have a second Zhou Ying suddenly appear atop the demon's head and stick a dagger straight into its brain.

Zhou Ying was testing a hypothesis: this time, she wouldn't kill the demon immediately. She would trap it and see if she could discover anything new.

Although each of the demons was individually quite weak, the fact that they would keep appearing right after she had killed one made them particularly troublesome foes.

The demon trapped by the wood dragons smirked. "It's useless. Your struggles are futile!"

The trees in the forest rustled as Zhou Ying's voice echoed. "So you can talk? I thought you were a doddering fool who only knew how to fight!"

The demon roared out in laughter. "Foolish, foolish indeed. No matter how many times you kill me, I'll just come back to life. I'm invincible. A thousand deaths, ten thousand deaths—nothing will hurt my immortal body."

"So you are the primordial great demon, after all!"

The demon king smirked again. "As charged. I'm a special existence, one that can never die."

"So not only can you reproduce by contact with other lifeforms, you must have some exceptional abilities of your own—regenerating your body from a drop of blood, perhaps, or being able to clone yourself?" Zhou Ying hedged.

Given the demon king's extreme regenerative ability, it could very well have left a piece of its flesh in a hidden location, which would regrow into a new demon king once its previous body had died.

However, the possibility of this happening was rather small. After all, who knew if the flesh that the primordial demon cut off would grow into another primordial demon and swallow up the first?

The next possibility Zhou Ying thought of was that the demon king in front of her wasn't its true body, but just a piece of flesh that the true demon king cut off and somehow induced to grow into a clone or facsimile of the real thing, while the true body lay in hiding. But if that were the case, why didn't the demon king just manifest hundreds or even thousands of such clones?

Zhou Ying then considered the possibility that these clones were time-limited, and that it was impossible to have too many active at the same time. But that didn't seem right, either. If that were the case, why wouldn't the demon king summon a group of them all at once to attack Zhou Ying after realizing that she was strong enough to easily defeat them?

Why did the demon king create one, and only one, clone at once?

Zhou Ying then recalled how, when she sliced off the demon king's wrist, that it immediately became a pile of toxic sludge. It was apparent that the demon king's flesh was no longer able to restore itself once it was separated from the main body. That flesh would quickly spoil and turn into a pile of toxic sludge.

Could the demon king have, like the sura monarch Suiyue in the second realm, gained access to mastery over time? No. Zhou Ying shook her head immediately.

She had experienced temporal power before at the hands of Zhang Lie and Fang Yi. Zhou Ying couldn't claim to be an expert, but she was certain that the demon king's power was something other than time.

The demon king that Zhou Ying's wood dragons had subdued was now little more than a ball of meat and flesh, so these bodies couldn't be illusions, either.

Zhou Ying settled on one possibility. "In the end, the most likely answer is that these bodies are all your clones."

The primordial demon laughed. "I don't know what these 'clones' are, but my power is inexhaustible and far superior to anything you puny humans might possess. You could hardly understand it."

"The power to be killed over and over again?"

The primordial demon was certain of his own superiority. "Your struggles are meaningless. Even the strongest foe would be exhausted to death after facing me time and time again."

It was Zhou Ying's turn to smile. "Your ability isn't all that strong. At the very least, it has a major flaw."

"Oh? That's impossible. My perfect, unparalleled ability has no such flaw!

Surely you don't think that you'll be able to deal with me just by trapping this body of mine?"

Zhou Ying fell silent.

The primordial demon raised his head to the skies and laughed. "Haha! I hadn't expected that my opponent would be so naive. Indeed, as you've seen, only one of me can be in existence at any point in time. Before the previous me dies, the next me won't be able to appear—so you just have to stop the previous me from dying. Don't you think I have a contingency for this obvious mechanism?"

Zhou Ying continued curiously, "Considering how quickly you regenerate, you certainly can't be able to commit suicide if you're all bound up."

The demon continued to smile.

"Your body might give off a toxic poison that's harmful to my ebony dragons and continuously corroding their bodies, but my dragons can restore themselves, and it won't be that easy for you to escape."

Zhou Ying was supplying more and more of her vitality to her dragons, restoring the damaged wood faster than the poison could corrode it.

"This poison is convenient," the demon king agreed, "but it's not my only means of escape."

Suddenly, the demon's stomach bloated, and something seemed to be making its way out of its body, as though it were about to vomit. The demon's constipated expression looked as though it was simultaneously trying to induce a gag reflex while preventing the vomitus from flowing out of its mouth. Its eyes turned bloodshot as yellow bile trickled down its nostrils, so corrosive it made its own body decay.

Zhou Ying grew alarmed at the sight. A thick vine grew out of one dragon and plugged up the demon's mouth, but it was already too late. As though the vomitus had finally found an opening, the demon king's body burst apart with such frightening corrosive ability that the poison seeping out of the demon king's body was nothing in comparison.

Simultaneously, the pustules on the demon king's skin all exploded, sending yellow-green phlegm, vomitus, and dark blood all over. Zhou Ying shuddered in disgust—the demon king had self-destructed, and the resulting explosion of bodily fluids had dissolved thousands of her dragons.

Zhou Ying sucked in a deep breath.

If not for the fact that she had bound the demon king up tightly, she might very well have perished from the attack as well. More importantly, the demon king was still hale and hearty, and its next body would be pristine.

Chapter 813: Viruses of Different Strains

Very quickly, the demon king made a reappearance. He called out arrogantly, "I told you, there's nothing you can do about me. Don't bother to struggle needlessly—I'll be able to revive no matter what!"

Zhou Ying asked, "I'll grant that I can't seem to kill you. How are you doing it?"

"I might as well be a mutated virus, you see. It spreads via touch, and every lifeform I encounter will turn into a demon. Once my body dies, infected lifeforms will enter the second stage of infection, and one of them will be chosen at random to become my host. As long as demons still remain in this world, I will never die!" the demon king crowed.

A regular hunter might be shocked or feel powerless, but Zhou Ying seemed to take everything in stride. "Have you looked closely at your surroundings?"

The demon king turned around. It had felt its environment changing, but it didn't notice precisely how until Zhou Ying pointed it out. A lot of greenery had suddenly appeared in the world...

Zhou Ying smiled. "I've taken over much of the forest already, and my reach will only keep expanding with time. Very quickly, this world will be taken over by the force of nature, and I'll be in control of all the lifeforms within. No demon shall survive under my rule!"

Then, she killed the demon king's body.

If the demon king were a virus with animals as its vectors, then Zhou Ying was a virus with plants as her vectors. This would be a showdown of control and transmission. Zhou Ying's wood dragons emerged from the soil, overwhelming the demon king in a huge flood.

As more and more of the land around Zhou Ying were subsumed under her control, her power waxed and began spreading even more quickly. The revived demon king felt threatened for the first time in recent memory. It had never encountered such a pesky foe, one who tried to take over the environment rather than fight it outright.

None of its enemies had ever found a way to deal with it. All they could do was run away—or die to his self-destructing bodies.

However, Zhou Ying was different. Her skill might well be in direct opposition to the demon king's own, and more frighteningly, it could visualize how she might succeed.

The demon king used its ultimate technique. It caught one of the demons around it and began to consume it whole while the other demons watched, trembling. They had been genetically transformed to serve him and him only, and they weren't even able to escape from his grasp.

As the demon king consumed more and more demons, its body began to grow wildly. Pustules began to spread over the surface of its body, large and bulbous, as though they were the heads of the demons it had consumed.

Meanwhile, Zhou Ying's energy continued to invade the forest and the land around it. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, she had terraformed half the world's swamps into verdant forests.

No miasma filled the air in the forests; the trees hummed with life. In her arena, filled with trees, plants, grasses, and shrubs, Zhou Ying was nigh undefeatable.

She looked around her and began to frown. After killing the last demon king, no new one had appeared. Surely the demon king couldn't have gotten so scared that it chose to run away? That was hardly possible.

According to the information that Zhang Lie had shared with the members of Team Zenith, kings of the realm rarely left their world. Only in their native world could they exert their full strength.

Regardless of what the demon king was planning, Zhou Ying was certain that she would be able to overcome it. What she had to do now was take control over as much territory as she could to bolster her power.

Suddenly, she felt a disturbance by the edge of the forest. Dark miasma flooded into her forest, causing any greenery it came into contact with to wither and die.

A huge demon king appeared in her sight.

Zhou Ying was astounded. The leaves of the forest shook and began to fall.

Her eyes bulged. This monstrosity was the demon king? It was over twenty meters tall, and its skin was pitch-black and covered with pustules all over. Bulbous tumors grew out of its limbs, and it exuded a fearsome miasma that gave off a truly vile stench, as though it were the combination of a month-old corpse allowed to decompose, a basement full of rotten eggs, coated with a layer of rotten durian.

As it trod over the ground, everything around it began to dissolve and decompose.

Zhou Ying couldn't allow this 'evolved' form of the demon king to get closer to the heart of the forest—if she did, everything would die, and her hard work would be for naught.

"[Avatar of the Fae: Worldbound Enclosure!]" Vitality swept forth from her like the tide. The verdant forest gave off a jade-green glow as energy seeped out of the trees and grasses.

The ground quaked. Moments later, burgeoning roots emerged from the soil and transformed into dragons of wood, forming a huge tide that swamped the demon king.

The demon king was surrounded by miasma so thick that even the reinforced ebony dragons were having trouble. Their bark was dissolved entirely by the miasma, and their bodies had grown so soft upon reaching the demon king that it could tear through them with a single swipe.

Zhou Ying had to adjust the composition of her ebony dragons. They began to twine around each other, forming pillars of wood and shielding each other from the worst of the impact. Even though the demon king's miasma was able to destroy their outer layer, they formed structures multiple dragons thick, enough to weather the assault.

Suddenly, the demon king's stomach began to bloat as it spat out dark yellow vomitus, dissolving the pillar of dragons whole. The bile was so corrosive that the ebony dragons couldn't even regenerate; Zhou Ying's strength wasn't sufficient to counteract that corrosion.

She had no choice but to continue supplying new wood dragons from the earth, inducing more and more growth. If not for the entire forest supporting her, she would have grown tired near-immediately.

Zhou Ying and the evolved demon king entered a stalemate: she continuously summoned more ebony dragons, while it continued spewing bile. Both sides were waiting for the other to be drained of their energy.

Zhou Ying was the first to suffer the impacts of a drawn-out battle. The forest's vitality wasn't limitless, and the trees by the outer perimeter slowly began to wither and die.

Just as she was about to collapse, however, the evolved demon king reached its threshold first. It didn't have an unlimited supply of bile, after all; as it continued to vomit, the tumors and pustules on its body began to shrink...

Chapter 814: The Devil Trees

When the evolved demon king saw that Zhou Ying was still barely holding on, it chose to self-destruct immediately. Its stomach began to bloat as it triggered its gag reflex and simultaneously held in its vomit. Its eyes turned bloodshot as yellow vomitus trickled down its nostrils, so corrosive it made its own body decay.

The demon king's swelling stomach looked like a bomb about to explode.

Upon seeing the demon king's condition, Zhou Ying's eyes widened, and she immediately controlled her ebony dragons to prevent the demon king's plan. Her wood dragons twined together into thick pillars, passed through the demon king's domain of miasma, and smashed into its stomach as the evolved demon king burst apart.

Dark yellow bile exploded all around it, each drop of vomit like a bullet piercing through the trees of the forest and exploding whatever it came in contact with. Yellow-green pus from the demon king's pustules exploded and accompanied its vomit.

Zhou Ying's face crumpled. Any lifeform in the forest who came in contact with a single drop of vomit would either die or, worse, become a demon itself.

The demon king's body likewise exploded, sending pitch-black blood flying all over. Its entire body was poisonous, including the vomitus it sprayed out, the pus from its pustules, and the blood flowing through its body.

The demon king's explosion was so massive in scope that it covered the entire forest.

Zhou Ying responded immediately. Thousands of wood dragons emerged from the earth—not to prevent the explosion, but rather to dive straight back underground.

The demon king's self-destruction melted almost the entirety of the forest, which Zhou Ying had spent such effort trying to terraform. As the poisonous air spread throughout, all the plants began to wilt, wither, and die.

The demon king's poison dissolved not only the greenery, but also the soil. Where the evolved demon king's body had once been was now a dark yellow swamp that was emitting noxious purple miasma.

The wood dragons emerged from where they had dove down into the earth, revealing a protective cocoon they had formed. The dragons twined around the cocoon's exterior were dissolving from the poison, but those within were safely shielded.

The cocoon broke open with a burst of vitality, revealing a goddess of nature with long, black hair that shone like jade. She was so beautiful that anyone who saw her would be immediately enraptured, and motes of vitality shone around her like fireflies.

Zhou Ying stepped out of the cocoon and sucked in a deep breath as she saw the land that had turned back into a poisonous swamp.

If not for Zhou Ying's astounding vitality, she would have been poisoned to death from the breath she had inhaled alone. The swamp was so poisonous that it was still corroding the soil and slowly spreading, growing ever larger.

It was slowly expanding beyond a swamp and into a sea, one where no greenery would ever grow out of the corrupt soil.

Even after the demon king's explosion, no rain of blood appeared, nor cries of mourning. The demon king hadn't yet died.

It was likely that the demon king had lost all capability for battle against Zhou Ying, and was currently hiding in a secluded corner of the world. Although it had successfully negated Zhou Ying's efforts since entering the world, the demon king was in no shape to hinder her further terraforming.

Without anything else in the world to threaten her, Zhou Ying left the poisonous sea and rekindled her efforts once again. When the entire world turned green, no matter where the demon king was hiding, she would have the final victory.

In the draconian world, the wall that Sun Mengmeng had been guarding now bordered a sea of purple flames. Devil trees were screeching in pain as they burned.

As Zhang Lie had indicated, Sun Mengmeng's elemental attunement perfectly countered the devil trees, who were being slaughtered one-sidedly on the battlefield, which looked like a scene straight from hell.

A gigantic devil tree screeched even as it rushed through the fire and toward the walls.

"This must be the devil trees' leader," Sun Mengmeng murmured, pulling her bow taut as flames licked her body. Three arrows filled with purple flame left her hand. "[Lunarflame Shot]!"

The three arrows exploded on contact with the gigantic devil tree's body, piercing it through.

As Sun Mengmeng put down her bow, the burning devil tree fell to the ground with a huge crash.

The human and draconian guards standing on the wall had foreheads beading with sweat— from the waves of heat emanating from the battlefield, and from Sun Mengmeng's stunning performance.

They had seen how Sun Mengmeng stood atop the wall like a god of war.

At the start of the battlefield, she had summoned a shower of purple meteors that lit up the heavens and turned the battlefield into a sea of purple flame. Subsequently, she shot at whatever devil tree

was able to make its way past the fields of fire and toward the wall. Her firepower alone was sufficient to defend the wall.

The humans and draconians stared at Sun Mengmeng's figure, tinted purple by flame, with awe and respect, with fear and rapture.

Tens of thousands of devil trees had been killed by the huntress who surveyed the battlefield from above. If the devil trees had known of such a peerless existence, they would never have dared to attack the draconian world.

Only when the last devil tree had been burned to a crisp by the flames did Sun Mengmeng finally hop off the wall. Her skills, well suited for field coverage, gave impressive results without draining her unduly.

"Wait for the flames to die out before reaping the spoils of the battlefield. I don't expect any more devil trees to invade; I'll head straight to their world and get rid of their king."

One of the guards, who had belatedly come to her senses, stepped forward. "Miss Sun, the draconian sage wishes to provide you with some information about the devil trees' world."

Sun Mengmeng glanced at the guard appraisingly. "More information would be appreciated."

"The devil trees' world is a large forest, one almost without end. All the trees within are devil trees, and the king of the devil trees has styled itself the world tree. It is an ancient tree spirit that has weathered years innumerable."

Sun Mengmeng nodded. "In other words, I'll be besieged from all fronts the moment I enter the world."

"Indeed so. The devil trees are cruel and crazed entities, ones that would immediately rush toward foreign invaders and turn them into fertilizer for themselves."

"Very well. I'd like to see if I'll become fertilizer, or they wood ash."

Chapter 815: Burning the Devil Trees

Sun Mengmeng entered the devil trees' world via the wormhole. As reported, before her lay a forest of pitch-black trees, so densely packed she couldn't see its borders. The trees were pitch-black and dozens of meters tall, the trunks so thick it would take five or six grown men holding hands to encircle them.

Even more shockingly, there was a tree so tall it seemed to extend straight into the clouds, and its trunk was so thick that one could carve a city into it, a veritable metropolis of the world. Its branches were like the spokes of an umbrella that shaded the world.

This had to be the king of the realm.

The moment Sun Mengmeng stepped into the forest, all the trees seemed to rustle at once. An eerie smile formed on the bark of the nearest trees as roots pierced the ground like feelers. Branches twisted and morphed into the trees' arms as the trees in the forest turned into devil trees.

The trees swarmed toward Sun Mengmeng.

According to the draconians' information, when the devil trees were in their tree forms, their roots were intertwined into a network that could rapidly transmit information. As a result, all the trees would immediately learn when an intruder stepped into their world.

The devil trees, as numerous as the tide, flocked over to Sun Mengmeng—but despite their steep numerical advantage, Sun Mengmeng remained calm. She summoned her garuda bow and activated her fire-attuned genetic energy.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" Fire-attuned genetic energy burst from Sun Mengmeng's body as her body erupted in flames. She pulled her greatbow taut.

Only a series of afterimages were visible of her hand as she shot countless arrows of purple flame of her bow, producing what seemed like a meteor shower that tinted the air purple and gave the valley a phantasmagorical appearance. The air turned dry and arid, as though a cataclysm was nigh.

Under the brilliant purple sky, the devil trees burst apart in spectacular explosions.

As the purple flames burned on and on, the devil trees' world morphed into purgatory. The devil trees cried out as their bodies turned to ash. The purple flames were manifestations of Sun Mengmeng's genetic energy, and were hundreds of times hotter than ordinary flames.

As Zhang Lie had said, Sun Mengmeng was a perfect counter to the devil trees. The purple flames spread quickly among their number, and they were all consumed by fire.

They screeched shrilly but continued to rush at Sun Mengmeng, willing to sacrifice their lives for this one attack.

"[Baptism of Hellfire: Full Moon]!" Sun Mengmeng whirled her daggers all around her as a black moon rose into the air. The moon glowed, causing purple flame to explode and clearing out a whole patch of devil trees.

As though they didn't fear death, more and more devil trees tried to crowd around Sun Mengmeng, as though all of them had simultaneously gone mad.

Sun Mengmeng cast [Black Sun], forming a cordon of purplish-black flame around her. Next, she activated her most impactful soulshards for battle, transforming from a young woman to a fierce warrior with a chitinous carapace, wreathed in black flame. Her flames were so intense that they were burning even the ground at her feet, causing it to turn red.

"[Netherworld's Gaze]!" Hundreds of arrows, like beams of moonlight, shot toward the devil trees. The scorching heat twisted the air and turned the devil trees into nothing more than ash.

The black flames from Sun Mengmeng's technique absorbed the purple flames that continued to burn and spread even further, without any sign of stopping—almost as though they would stop at nothing to burn the whole world down.

The scene in front of Sun Mengmeng was apocalyptic.

"I'll kill any of you that approach," Sun Mengmeng called out, gripping her bow tightly in her hands.

Upon sensing the remarkable heat and Sun Mengmeng's insolent threat, even the devil tree king couldn't stand still any longer. The world tree itself made a move.

As the king invoked the authority of the realm, a cyclone manifested around the world tree, stirring up fallen leaves and branches and blowing out the black flames. The world tree's leaves were no joke—a single leaf had a serrated edge sharp enough to cut steel apart.

Kings of the realm were at a level at which their bodies had no weaknesses to exploit. The world tree's leaves were sharp, piercing projectiles in their own right. As the storm raged, a volley of leaves flew toward Sun Mengmeng.

"[The Nine Moons of the Underworld]!" Nine flaming moons appeared in the sky, overshadowing the sun's radiance and falling from the sky one by one, each a meteor.

The two attacks nullified each other. One moon blocked the world tree's leaves and exploded in black flame, followed rapidly by the other moons. Black flame crept closer to the world tree, devouring everything in sight.

The storm that the world tree had summoned spread the fire and spurred it onwards. Quite a few sparks landed atop the world tree's leaves and began burning it.

The world tree's storm was almost more a hindrance than a help. As the surroundings filled up with black flame, the remaining three moons that Sun Mengmeng had summoned fell toward the world tree.

The world tree waved a branch and caused all three moons to explode, leaving scorch marks on the surface of its bark. The ground trembled and cracked as a thick root emerged from the ground, slicing toward Sun Mengmeng like a sharp sword.

As it struck, thunder resounded in the air. The pressure from the strike alone was sufficient to extinguish the flames on the ground.

"[Baptism of Hellfire: Full Moon]!" Sun Mengmeng whirled her daggers around her as she stomped on the ground.

The ground exploded. Flames burst into the sky. Cracks of lava spread across the ground.

Wreathed in black flame, Sun Mengmeng took to the air. In her chitinous armor, she looked like a warrior who had just opened the gates to the underworld. Black flame surrounded her, scorching hot, making her look like a star that was falling to the ground.

Her flaming arrows struck the world tree's roots and exploded in mid-air. The explosion was strong enough to crack the roots and branches and send them flying off, leaving green sap that sizzled as it landed on the flames.

A face appeared in the world tree's bark as the devil tree king shrieked in agony, its cries causing sound waves to billow around the tree, almost as though a cyclone had been summoned. Since becoming a tree, it hadn't experienced such pain for decades...

Chapter 816: The Devil Tree King

A swarm of black dots emerged from the world tree's body—what seemed to be a whole host of black beetles.

The world tree lived in symbiosis with a large number of bugs and insects, who lived off the tree's sap and the pests that tried to harm it. When the world tree was in trouble, they were its first line of defense.

If the devil trees were like commoners and soldiers, then the black beetles were the imperial guards.

They were present in large numbers and had speed and agility far surpassing the devil trees'. The beetles that emerged from the world tree would be able to devour all the devil trees in the world if they wanted to.

The swarm looked like a storm of black clouds. Each beetle was the size of a human and looked fierce and sinister.

"[Lunar Apostasy]!" Sun Mengmeng's entire bow was blazing. She launched her arrows straight into the air, which exploded among the clouds and formed a black moon, which shot down rays of moonlight. on the descending beetles.

The beetles burst apart into black fireballs and fell from the sky like an endless rain of black. The smell of charred flesh filled the air with a sharp tang.

A large beetle emerged from the black flames. It was larger than the others, and its carapace glinted with metallic light.

Three arrows filled with black flame left Sun Mengmeng's hand.

"[Lunarflame Shot: Pierce]!" The three blackflame arrows corkscrewed around each other, trailing light and heat as they struck the beetle directly in a conflagration of darkness, piercing through its carapace and drilling a small hole in the world tree's bark, though the world tree's regeneration quickly healed it.

There were many symbiotic bugs that the world tree sustained, almost an ecosystem in its own right. Sun Mengmeng had just dealt with one group when another one appeared in even greater quantities, like a black storm poised to overwhelm the entire world.

"[Netherworld's Torrential Flame]!" A frightening fan of flames poured out from Sun Mengmeng's bow,

The flames arced in the air and fell toward the battlefield in a waterfall. They scoured the bugs from the sky and even the devil trees on the ground; half the world seemed to be alight.

The devil tree king roared in outrage as the entire world shook. The ground cracked, and thick roots emerged like gigantic dragons. Compared to these roots, Zhou Ying's ebony dragons were minuscule in comparison.

As the ground continued to quake and the terrain transformed, the devil trees on the ground stumbled and fell. Huge roots slammed down toward Sun Mengmeng.

"[Lunarflame Shot: Ninefold Phantasmagoria]." Sun Mengmeng launched another attack in mid-air as she propelled herself backwards. Her surroundings began to burn with dark flames. Nine purplish-black phoenixes rose up around her and clashed against the thick roots. As the black flames exploded, the roots were flung back.

The flames formed a black rose in the air, which burst apart and intensified the flames all around them. The tree roots were obliterated, as were the devil trees on the ground below them. Blistering heat swept over the battlefield, melting boulders and turning the ground into lava.

The world tree let out a shrill scream. Its crown of leaves shook wildly, and the face that appeared on its bark made an enraged expression. It had been many long years since any lifeform had dealt it so much damage.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" As Sun Mengmeng channeled her anger into her flames, her fire-attuned genetic energy reached new heights. Black flames erupted from her very body, and the ground beneath her began to melt.

She drew her bow taut. The black flames that had gathered around her condensed into an arrow of pure black. Behind Sun Mengmeng appeared a black sun, one which gave off piercing light. The temperature of the battlefield ratcheted up.

With black flames coursing through her body, Sun Mengmeng compressed the arrow she was forming once and again, packing in more and more heat until it reached a critical threshold.

The arrow was pitch-black and limned by a layer of black flame that seemed to have transformed into plasma. The shadow of a golden bird emerged before the black sun to Sun Mengmeng's back. Black flame flowed through its body like lava.

Its eyes were piercing; as it spread its wings wide and cawed, the blackflame arrow shot out of Sun Mengmeng's bow, transforming into a beam of light, moving so quickly that it bypassed the constraints of time and space, as though it could pierce everything and anything.

The arrow caused no earth-shattering explosion. It was plain and ordinary, and no sound marked its advance. It flew across the battlefield, which ignited with black flames behind it.

Thick roots emerged from the world tree and wove themselves into a wall that blocked Sun Mengmeng's arrow. Heat heralded the arrow's appearance; even before it struck the wall of roots, black scorch marks were appearing on the roots' surface.

As the arrow drew closer and closer, those marks began to spread and grow darker.

The thick roots might as well have been papier mache—the arrow pierced through the root barrier almost instantly.

Considering how fast the arrow was, the world tree was unable to prepare another defense in time. The arrow struck the world tree's bark directly, piercing it whole and causing the hole left behind to erupt into flames. A wave of heat followed the arrow, swallowing up heaven and earth.

The hole the arrow left in its wake was the size of half a city. The world tree began to tilt, and then to fall—but right before it could do so, thick roots emerged from the ground and propped it up.

Given the world tree's superior regenerative abilities, it should have been able to recover from the wound in the blink of an eye, but the world tree was unable to do so this time. The hole in its trunk was too large, too gaping, and the ridiculous heat packed into the arrow had all but cauterized the wound.

If not for the roots that were holding it up, the world tree would have collapsed. It had lived in the world for so long that it had lost track of time, and it would be no exaggeration to call it the most ancient tree the world knew. All its enemies had perished with the passing of time and age, and it had all but forgotten how to deal with such dangerous foes...

Chapter 817: An Annoying Foe

Regardless, if the world tree wanted to survive this ordeal, it would have to give its all to stop Sun Mengmeng—or die in the process.

The entire world shook as a thousand thick roots emerged from the ground like gigantic dragons. The world tree itself morphed into a titanic devil, its branches and leaves twisting to form two thick palms. The devil uprooted itself, inclined its head, and roared up at the sky.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" Fire-attuned genetic energy burst from Sun Mengmeng's body as her body erupted in flames. She pulled her greatbow taut.

Only a series of afterimages were visible of her hand as she shot countless arrows of black flame of her bow, producing what seemed like a meteor shower that tinted the air black and gave the valley a phantasmagorical appearance. The air turned dry and arid, as though a cataclysm was nigh.

The flaming black meteors gave off an aura of destruction and annihilation. The devil tree king swept an arm before Sun Mengmeng's arrows, causing them all to explode and summoning up a strong gale.

With overpowering strength, it wiped out the arrows from the sky—at a cost. Black flames ravaged the king's palms, burning as it spread.

"[Netherworld's Gaze]!" Hundreds of arrows, like beams of moonlight, shot toward the devil tree king at such high temperatures that the very air warped and began to combust.

The devil tree king blocked them all with hundreds of branches. The flames erupted with a spectacular explosion, but the branches bolstered by the king of the realm's authority survived the onslaught and flew toward Sun Mengmeng.

"[Lunarflame Shot: Extirpation of the Garuda]!" As Sun Mengmeng infused her genetic energy into the bow, the image of a garuda appeared behind her. Black flames whirled around her like a cyclone, and the air turned scorching.

As she released her arrow, it morphed into a human-faced, golden-winged bird that radiated red light as it arced through the skies. Black flames flared from under its wings that seemed to cover the sun, spreading out in waves from the garuda, charged with so much energy that they could destroy heaven and earth.

Sun Mengmeng's attack scorched the heavens and the earth, dyeing everything in sight a patch of black. The devil tree king's branches splintered and cracked in the face of that attack.

"[Lunarflame Shot: Extirpation of the Garuda]!" Sun Mengmeng pulled her bow taut once more, infusing the rest of her genetic energy within. The image of a garuda materialized from thin air and, supercharged with Sun Mengmeng's energy, readied for a devastating blow.

Even before the arrow landed, lava rose out of the ground, igniting the earth and sky alike. Black flames gathered, sucking in the light from all around like black holes and devouring everything in sight.

With its branches burned to a crisp, the devil tree king lost its primary means of protecting itself. It stretched out its black, burning palms in an attempt to block the fierce garuda's assault, but they broke and splintered in an instant. The flaming garuda struck at the devil tree king with the power of annihilation, sending huge gales whirling through the battlefield on impact.

All the remaining devil trees were wiped out by those gales, and the devil tree king, its whole body aflame, finally fell to the ground. The entire world shook as shockwaves buffeted everything in sight.

The world tree's roots, now exposed, burned amidst the black flame, giving off a malodorous smoke. With one final arrow from Sun Mengmeng, the fallen world tree ceased its struggles, and the will of the world mourned the passing of another king.

A rain of blood fell to the ground, though it was unable to extinguish the black flames.

Sun Mengmeng stored her bow. The battle was over.

Meanwhile, Zhou Ying had turned the entirety of the demons' world green. She had used her vitality to fill the entire world with greenery, thinking that she would be able to ferret out the primordial demon, only to be unable to find him.

"Could he have escaped from the world?" she wondered.

That was unlikely, so there was only one possibility: it was hiding in the poisonous sea that she had just vacated.

"[Avatar of the Fae: Worldbound Enclosure]!" Zhou Ying summoned a large number of ebony dragons to search for any traces of the primordial demon. She could vaguely sense its presence deep below, but was unable to capture it.

Her ebony dragons could only survive for a short period of time, and they weren't able to track down the primordial demon during that time.

Zhou Ying recalled how Zhang Lie had mentioned that it would be very difficult to trap a king of the realm who was completely focused on fleeing and hiding.

She had avoided the poisonous sea during her reforestation. With her trees as surveillance, it should have been very hard for the primordial demon to escape unnoticed, but it had indeed done so.

Zhou Ying quickly thought of a skill that kings of the realm possessed: spatial teleportation.

That had to be how the demon king was able to escape her surveillance and head into the poisonous sea!

Although the primordial demon hadn't demonstrated this power during their battle, that didn't mean that it was incapable of doing so. Each king of the realm had varying levels of affinity with their authority, and spatial attunement was one of the hardest to make full use of. Invoking that element of a king's authority required careful thought and deliberate practice, especially in a combat-oriented environment.

Most kings of the realm who were unfamiliar with the inner workings of space tended to avoid using such techniques in combat, but that didn't mean they wouldn't use it outside of combat. While Zhou Ying was slowly reforesting the entire planet, the primordial demon used that unfamiliar power to teleport itself into the poisonous sea.

Even if Zhou Ying were to slowly dredge the toxic sea, the primordial demon would likely teleport away again.

"Indeed, a king's authority is truly a blessing. There's no oxygen in the sea, so the fact that the demon king can still survive there is..."

Hold on—oxygen? Zhou Ying thought she had the spark of a new idea. How did the primordial demon deal with the issue of lacking oxygen?

The answer was simple: an existence on the level of the demon king didn't need oxygen to begin with. It was already past the level of a peak-grade lifeform, and it could survive even without consuming food or breathing.

Zhou Ying sighed when she realized that her new idea wasn't a breakthrough.

Once again, she returned to the problem of trying to drag out the primordial demon. It would be relatively easy, if time-consuming, to dredge the silt from the sea, or even to strip the neighboring area of oxygen, but neither strategy would get her closer to the primordial demon, who possessed the power of teleportation and could escape at will.

"What would Zhang Lie do at a time like this?" Zhou Ying wondered.

Chapter 818: A Single Punch

If Zhang Lie were around, he wouldn't have to think of a way out of this conundrum at all. Even if the king of the realm possessed authority over space, so too did Zhang Lie, and Zhang Lie would be able to wall off the king of the realm and prevent him from teleporting away easily.

However, Zhou Ying wasn't Zhang Lie. She might not be able to stop the king of the realm so cleanly or easily, but she still wanted to give it a try.

"I surely can't give up without trying. That's not how we hunters of Team Zenith operate!"

Having made up her mind, Zhou Ying summoned a large number of vines to suck up and purify the poison, depleting the swamp bit by bit. However, the poison was so toxic that the vines would dissolve almost immediately, and Zhou Ying had to come up with a new strategy.

With a snap of her fingers, she animated the nearby trees and made them into treemen, who began to dig up the mud forming the poisonous sea and transporting it elsewhere.

Ordinary treemen succumbed easily to the poison and began to wilt rapidly, but the plan was bearing fruit: the sea of poison was diminishing in volume slowly with every passing second. Zhou Ying stood right by the border, closing her eyes and pushing at the edges of her sensory perception.

Wind blew across the forest and caressed her face, sweeping up errant leaves. Zhou Ying, who stood at the edge of the forest, seemed to have become one with the land.

By the time the sea of poison was at half its former height, the primordial demon couldn't remain still any longer. It began to activate its teleportation routine to run away.

The moment Zhou Ying sensed the fluctuations in space, she opened her eyes. "I've finally found you! [Storm of Leaves: Void Cut]!"

She cut forward with her shortsword, sending a silver beam of light forward that split the sea of poison in two.

The teleportation circle that the primordial demon was constructing had likewise been cut apart. The primordial demon glared, unable to believe that Zhou Ying had managed to sense it through thick layers of poison and detritus.

Zhou Ying had sent the vines into the sea of poison despite the fact that they would rapidly corrode not just to suck away the mud and poison, but also as a probe for her senses.

With her vines, she would be able to sense any changes in the sea of poison below her, no matter how minute. Her [Void Cut] split the primordial demon in two, so quickly and cleanly that it died without being able to evade or defend against the blow.

The will of the world mourned the passing of another king as a rain of blood fell from the skies.

Zhou Ying had succeeded in her goal, but even though the king was dead, she had no clue where its proof of kingship was. As a result, she was forced to search the entire world for any hint of its existence.

Meanwhile, Zhang Lie had reached the other end of his wormhole as well. He entered a forest of black Chinese parasol trees. An unusual black sun hung in the air.

Zhang Lie stretched his limbs, wondering how to smoke the king of the realm out, when he suddenly noticed a formless will studying him. The moment he stepped into the world, the Blackwind king had sensed his presence.

A black firebird had appeared above him, with an immense wingspan that seemed almost to blot out the sky.

"Human, what are you doing here?"

In truth, the Blackwind king was rather perplexed. He had just sent his kin over to the draconian world, so how did a human make it through the wormhole so shortly afterwards? What had happened to the Blackwind warriors?

The Blackwind king's body flared with flames as he snarled, "Tell me, or I'll burn you to a crisp!"

"The Blackwind race will perish today," Zhang Lie intoned, clenching his fists tightly as blue genetic energy gathered around him. Ripples of genetic energy emanated from his arms. As he flicked his wrists, a frightening aura descended on the world, and the skies began to darken. A fish the size of a whale materialized in the air.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" Ripples of energy spread out from Zhang Lie, warping the space around him and launching shockwaves toward the Blackwind race sounding like peals of thunder, like stampeding hooves.

A huge wave soared into the air. As Zhang Lie punched forward, the fish slammed its huge tail on the ground and sent a torrent of water surging in the king's direction.

The shockwaves and water-attuned genetic energy exploded, releasing a huge burst of energy that swallowed up the nearby lifeforms like a rampaging beast.

The Blackwind who were hovering in the sky were immediately annihilated, and the resulting aftermath of the attack spawned a cyclone that ravaged the remaining Blackwind forces.

The black Chinese parasol trees were uprooted whole, transforming what had once been a forest into flat land.

The flames on the Blackwind king were all but snuffed out; he looked like a dim candle as he floated in the air.

Zhang Lie seemed rather surprised. "Oh? You're not dead yet even after a direct hit from me? That's impressive."

The Blackwind king invoked the authority of the king to connect to the black sun in the sky. Solar flames fell toward him, infusing him with their strength and healing his injuries rapidly.

He shouted, "My people, your king needs your assistance!"

Huge flocks of the Blackwind emerged from the forests, surrounding the Blackwind king and flying toward him like moths toward a flame, converting their bodies and lifeforce into his strength.

Zhang Lie was taken aback by the fact that the Blackwind king was sacrificing his people so easily just to bolster himself.

In the span of just a few breaths, after linking up with the black sun in the sky and restoring himself with his clan's vitality, the Blackwind king transformed into a gigantic sun, one so hot it lit the forest aflame just by being close to it.

After his evolution, the Blackwind king was in high spirits once more. "Human, I'll acknowledge your strength. It's little wonder why the Blackwind soldiers haven't yet returned—but now that I've transformed fully into a black sun, you have no chance of victory. On account of your strength, if you kneel on the ground and decide to become a slave to the Blackwind clan, I might consider sparing your life."

"You're finished with your grandstanding now, aren't you?"

Zhang Lie had had the opportunity to take down the Blackwind king with another well-timed blow, but he chose not to do so.

He wanted to wait for the Blackwind king to reach the peak of his strength, then crush him then—to make him sense the deepest of despair.

The Blackwind king went silent. As far as he could recall, any of his enemies who witnessed him in this ascended state fell into despair; who could fight a force of nature like the sun?

However, Zhang Lie didn't seem to be perturbed by his transformation at all.

The Blackwind king called out, "Human, you're far too arrogant for your own good. Feel the difference in our strength!"

Zhang Lie laughed. "Well, if you're done, you can die now. [The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!"

Water-attuned genetic energy wrapped around his finger. As he pointed his finger like a sword, a black serpent shot forward with the aura of [The Boundless Blade], causing the entire world to quake with its motion.

In one bite, the serpent swallowed up half the black sun that composed the Blackwind king's new form.

"You dare!" The Blackwind king roared in outrage. Solar flares emerged on its surface as it summoned a solar storm. Ions and plasma shot out from the sun in a blast, sending thunder and lightning crackling through the skies.

"[Ninecarp Transformation]!" The black serpent materialized anew behind Zhang Lie, by now so large and so developed that it resembled the world-swallowing serpent Jormungandr. Though it was a construct of genetic energy, it looked just like a physical being. It was unfazed by the Blackwind king's attack.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" The black serpent charged into the sky like a current of darkness, throwing its bulk directly into the solar storm with a sizzle. It opened its maw wide, planning to swallow up the sun, as the black sun began to burn even more violently. The two opposing forces clashed against each other with a violent explosion.

Zhang Lie clenched his palm more and more tightly as the black serpent's form condensed and began to absorb the black sun into itself...

Chapter 819: Return of the Hunters

"You!" The black sun fell from the sky, heading straight for Zhang Lie. The Blackwind king was trying to strike Zhang Lie with his very body, but Zhang Lie instantly transformed into a dragonwolf and struck at the half-crippled sun with a punch that shook the entire world. The black serpent and sun exploded instantly.

Black flames roiled across heaven and earth. The serpent's black, corrosive energy rained down on the forest and melted it down.

As the rain landed on the ground, the earth began to sizzle—and for a hundred, a thousand years, nothing would ever grow on this soil again.

The Blackwind king was once again reduced to a candle-sized flame that could be snuffed out at any moment. He tried to run away, but found Zhang Lie waiting for him along his escape route, his hands clasped behind his back, a faint smile on his face.

The candle flame shivered in mid-air. "Hold on, hold on! I think we should have a discussion instead!"

The flame was so weak that it would have been snuffed out by a strong wind.

Zhang Lie's face was cold and dark. Water-attuned genetic energy gathered around him, shaking the space with its force.

"What's there to discuss?"

"Did you have a discussion with the draconians before betraying them?"

"Did you have a discussion with Chen Ruiming before killing him?"

"Did you have a discussion with the humans before backstabbing them?"

The Blackwind king trembled again in fear. "I was wrong. The Blackwind clan shouldn't have attacked the humans; we're willing to serve the humans and atone for our mistakes!"

Zhang Lie's eyes glimmered with rainbow light as he searched through the king's memories for the location of the proof of kingship. After doing so, he reached out and grabbed the flame with his hand. "You don't deserve to serve us humans. Be extinguished!"

Zhang Lie snuffed the flame out in his palm, retrieved the proof of kingship, and returned to the draconian world.

By that time, the draconian world was safe from any incursion. The members of Team Zenith and the warlords of the Milky Way had successfully accomplished their tasks and resisted the incursion of the alien races.

As for whether or not they would be able to kill their respective kings of the realm, Zhang Lie wasn't concerned. He believed in the ability of his subordinates and the warlords he sent to tail them.

Once he returned to the draconian world, Li Qianlin asked him excitedly, "You're back! How did it go?"

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes at her. "Aren't you underestimating me? Even your father was unable to beat me up, let alone the king of a medium-sized world."

Zhang Lie placed an object on the table: a carving of a black phoenix, emitting the foreign and mysterious aura of a proof of kingship.

Li Qianlin stuck out her tongue. "I was simply worried for you."

Zhang Lie caressed her cheeks and gazed into her lustrous eyes. Li Qianlin watched him expectantly, and Zhang Lie was about to lean in when a voice came from outside the room. "Captain, I'm back!"

Yang Ze strode in to see the two people together before hurriedly covering his eyes and striding back out. "Ah, my eyes were injured in battle just now. I can't see anything, and I didn't see anything! Continue on..."

Zhang Lie sighed as he turned around. "Get back here!"

Yang Ze warily sidled back up to the entrance to the room.

Zhang Lie remarked, "I didn't think you would be the first one back—but I suppose it's not surprising. You're wily and cunning, and far more suited to war than the others."

Yang Ze grumbled, "Ah, what do you mean, Captain! You make it sound as though I'm weaker than the others—as though I'm only good at coming up with tricks! I won't deny that I'm smart and intelligent, but I'm a strong hunter, too! I'm not idly bragging—I'm as strong as I'm handsome."

Zhang Lie glanced at Yang Ze's face with interest. "What a pity... I didn't know you were so weak!"

Yang Ze frowned. "Captain, are you criticizing my strength, or criticizing my looks? You—well, you might not look favorably on my strength compared to yours, but you can't deny that I'm handsome!"

He retrieved a golden vertebra from his extra-dimensional storage and placed it on the table, right next to the Blackwind phoenix statue. The golden vertebra gave off the aura of a proof of kingship; it was the prize that Yang Ze had recovered after a heated battle.

"Look at this, look at this—it's proof of my handsomeness!"

Li Qianlin pursed her lips. "This proves your strength at most, not your handsomeness, surely?"

Yang Ze seemed to be terribly shocked. "Ah, Mrs. Zhang! Are those truly your heartfelt words? You're already treating Zhang Lie like your husband and agreeing with him on everything, aren't you? You'll make my heart bleed!"

Li Qianlin couldn't help but blush at Yang Ze's mode of address for her.

Zhang Lie waved a hand. "Alright, enough. How did you feel about the trial this time around?"

Yang Ze thought back to his fight. "Kings of the realm really are quite interesting, aren't they?"

Yang Ze's fight had been relatively straightforward, so he simply found the kings of the realm to be interesting, rather than exasperating, difficult, or troublesome foes.

Zhang Lie didn't comment. He raised his head and looked out the window, having sensed another party's aura even before they entered the draconian city.

"What's the matter, Captain?" Yang Ze asked.

Very quickly, a fiery-red figure appeared in sight: Sun Mengmeng had returned. She didn't have many injuries visible on her body; even her clothes hadn't burned off the way they tended to during a heated battle.

The moment she saw Zhang Lie, she smiled. "Captain, I'm back. I've accomplished the task you've set for me."

Zhang Lie nodded. The moment Sun Mengmeng stepped into the room, she locked eyes with Li Qianlin. Sparks flew where their gazes met.

As though challenging Sun Mengmeng, Li Qianlin sidled closer to Zhang Lie. Meanwhile, Sun Mengmeng marched into the room and sat on Zhang Lie's other side, the two women continuing to stare at each other all throughout.

Yang Ze coughed and dispelled the awkward atmosphere. "How were your spoils, Sun Mengmeng?"

"It took me some time, but I managed to find the proof of kingship in the devil tree king's body." Sun Mengmeng retrieved the proof of kingship, a glowing seed.

Zhang Lie asked her, "How did you feel about the trial?"

Sun Mengmeng thought for a moment. "It was an enlightening experience. The devil tree king was a very difficult foe, and the others would have had a much harder time with it than I did."

Yang Ze cocked his head. Did Sun Mengmeng really think her trial was difficult? Why was his different?

Sun Xiaowu was the next to return. He had a long, thin object draped around his shoulder, over three meters long in all. It was wrapped in cloth.

When he saw Sun Mengmeng and Yang Ze sitting within, Sun Xiaowu sighed in relief. He hung the cloth-wrapped object by the doorframe. "Luckily, it looks like I'm not the last one back."

Sun Mengmeng walked up to him and gave him a once-over, then patted him on the shoulder.

"You've done well," she reassured him.

Sun Xiaowu smiled embarrassedly and unwrapped the object. "Captain, I've brought back the proof of kingship."

Zhang Lie nodded and asked, "How did you feel about the trial?"

Sun Xiaowu's weariness was apparent from his face. "The king of the realm was very strong, and I almost failed to make it back."

Yang Ze frowned. "The king really was that strong?"

Sun Xiaowu nodded. "Of course! He could invoke the authority of the world itself! Didn't our captain mention that the king of the realm has to be essentially the strongest member of the strongest race in the world? How could a king of the realm not be strong?"

Chapter 820: The Death Spirits

Sun Mengmeng turned toward Yang Ze. "Didn't you encounter a king of the realm too?"

Yang Ze thought, "I did kill one, but he didn't seem all that strong..."

Sun Xiaowu replied, "Perhaps you met one of the weaker ones?"

Zhang Lie smiled as he listened to the hunters' conversation. Li Qianlin poured him tea, and he took a sip. He knew the answer to their conundrum, but he didn't intend on revealing it.

Dong Mingxing also ran into the room, enticed by the commotion she heard. "Ah, Zhang Lie, you're back! And there are so many people with you, too."

Dong Mingxing had a seat and began sipping at tea, her movements so natural it was almost as though she had made herself at home.

Li Qianlin began, "As far as I know, there are no weak kings of the realm."

Yang Ze shrugged. "We fight differently, so we might come to different conclusions about the same foe, after all."

Sun Mengmeng and Sun Xiaowu both found the kings of the realm they faced to be quite strong, but Yang Ze disagreed. The kings might have been somewhat interesting, but nothing more than that.

Whereas the Sun siblings preferred to tackle their enemies head-on, Yang Ze preferred to get his hands dirty as little as possible. To put it nicely, Yang Ze was sly and slippery. He fought dirty.

He preferred to avoid direct confrontation and to make use of strategy and tactics to win his battles as efficiently as possible, and many of his techniques were designed to help him achieve just that.

Strategy and tactics were part of his strength, after all. Sun Mengmeng and Sun Xiaowu had to face their foes with a hundred percent of their strength, but Yang Ze only needed half, or even less, of that. This was the difference that tactics achieved during a battle, as well as what Zhang Lie wanted everyone to learn from him.

However, trying to use tactics efficiently enough to deal with foes of the same level was hardly straightforward, and Zhang Lie didn't insist that everyone focus on it.

The fourth to return was Fang Yi, but he had to be carried back in.

Yang Ze gulped. "What happened to you?"

Xing Ying, who had carried Fang Yi back, replied, "Thanks to the miraculous potions you guys brought back from the second realm, he's fine—just physically exhausted and drained."

The restoratives that Zhou Ying had produced were able to increase cellular activity and alleviate muscle fatigue rapidly, but even they couldn't do much about mental fatigue. Instant recovery was impossible, especially given how much Fang Yi had exerted himself.

The members of Team Zenith knew that Fang Yi had been experimenting with two ultimate techniques in the second realm.

"I used both of my ultimate techniques in quick succession," Fang Yi explained in embarrassment.

Yang Ze sucked in a deep breath. "The king of the realm you faced was that strong?"

Fang Yi sighed, relief creeping into his tone. "As expected of one of our captain's trials—it was far too harsh! If not for Warlord Xing Ying's assistance, I wouldn't have made it back."

Even Sun Mengmeng and Sun Xiaowu seemed taken aback by this revelation.

After a moment's silence, Yang Ze murmured, "I might have killed a fake king..."

Fang Yi turned to the three hunters who had returned before him.

"Did you all kill your assigned kings of the realm, too?"

Fang Yi was shocked that they were all unharmed. Sun Mengmeng, he could understand—she had been facing devil trees, and her elemental attunement was a perfect counter for them. Yang Ze and Sun Xiaowu, on the other hand, didn't seem injured either. Sun Xiaowu's face had traces of fatigue, but Yang Ze looked as though he had just come back from a walk outside.

The three hunters all nodded, pointing at the proofs of kingship they had retrieved.

"How?" Fang Yi asked curiously.

Sun Xiaowu replied, "By defeating the king in battle, of course!"

Fang Yi sucked in a deep breath. "Didn't you have to do anything special?"

Sun Xiaowu cocked his head. "What are you referring to?"

Fang Yi scowled. "Why are all of you fine? When did I start falling so far behind?!"

Fang Yi knew that the hunters of Team Zenith were all roughly equal in strength—at least, that was the case before they had ascended to the third realm.

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "No, you haven't fallen behind. You're just unlucky."

Fang Yi turned to Zhang Lie. "What? What do you mean, Captain?"

Zhang Lie replied, "It's exactly as I've stated. Why do you think I dispatched some warlords to help you out?"

"Isn't it because I was so weak that I needed the help?"

"No—the trial I planned was for all of you to fight against the kings of the realm to get a sense for their power and the authority they control. Feel what the peak of the third realm is like. I hope all of you have gotten a sense of that. Of course, I don't intend for any of you to die in a trial. The world of the black spirits is rather unusual, and none of the three of them would have fared any better than you there."

Yang Ze asked curiously, "What's so special about it?"

"Any living creature who steps into the world of the black spirits will be haunted by void spirits. They're about as weak as mutated-grade lifeforms, but they come in endless numbers. There's also a mysterious black pyramid, the apex of which can shoot out a laser of light..."

Fang Yi described his experience in that unusual, arcane world.

The other three hunters of Team Zenith were gobsmacked. Compared to Fang Yi, they had been playing on easy mode; Fang Yi was trapped on a nightmarish difficulty.

Endless spirits, a black pyramid, and the inverted pyramid that lay beneath, disaster-grade lifeforms hiding in the desert—all of Fang Yi's encounters were far beyond what they had to go through.

When Yang Ze finished hearing Fang Yi's recounting of his struggles, he patted him on the shoulder. "You've had it hard, my dear friend."

Fang Yi seemed on the verge of tears. "I feel like I've been targeted... Captain, Zhang Lie, have I done anything to offend you? Tell me directly if that's the case—I could have died fighting the king of the black spirits!"

Zhang Lie scoffed. "Am I that petty?"

Sun Mengmeng nodded seriously. "Right, if our captain really didn't like you, you wouldn't have made it back alive."

She felt an instinctive desire to defend Zhang Lie.

Li Qianlin agreed. "I don't want to agree with this woman, but she's right. If Zhang Lie really wanted to mess with someone, he wouldn't need to use such tricks. One glance and you'd be vaporized."

Zhang Lie choked on his tea.

Fang Yi still didn't understand. "Why was I the only one who received this 'special treatment'?"

Yang Ze replied, "It must be because our captain really values you and wants to challenge you in particular."

"...I'm touched, but I'd rather not in the future, thank you."

Zhang Lie rolled his eyes. "You really are overthinking it. I said it just now, didn't I? You were simply unlucky. You were the ones who picked out which kings you would face, not me."

Sun Mengmeng asked, "Are these black spirits really that powerful?"

Zhang Lie replied, "Well, they're backed by a super-large world, the death spirits' world."

Li Qianlin grew pale. "The death spirits?!"