

U. Warlord 1381

Chapter 1381: Spirit Bright, Spirit Light

Although the chimera's core was five times larger than ordinary disaster-grade cores, Zhang Lie had rich experience absorbing them at this point. The fivefold energy rampaged through his body with uncommon force. An ordinary hunter's body would have been destroyed, but Zhang Lie was an emperor-grade lifeform. He merely found the sensations in his body somewhat interesting.

When Zhang Lie maxed out his disaster gene fragments, a different transformation happened. He sat cross-legged in that pocket dimension, deep in meditation, his body forging itself anew with every breath.

An indeterminate amount of time passed. Without anyone to disturb him, without any sudden fluctuations to his emotions, he gradually began to smile, a reflection of his heart and inner being.

Light began to shine from his body. He was surrounded by a glowing ball of light, and the skin beneath that was revealed was a pearlescent white, supple and smooth. A spiritual glow suffused him.

His bones cracked as they became even stronger and sturdier, taking on a metallic luster. A membrane of crystalline light formed over their surface, strengthening them, improving their ductility and hardness. His body was being reforged from the inside out and the outside in, as though becoming that of a deity.

Muscle, flesh, skin, and bone merged together in a flash of blinding light. Membranes of diaphanous light brimmed with vitality.

In that transcendent state, time passed in the blink of an eye. He spent a week in meditation, freed of worry, freed of strife, freed of turmoil and dissonance. There he found an intrinsic joy.

Zhang Lie breathed out with a puff of light. The air that was sucked into his body took on the shape of dragons. He breathed with a particular rhythm, neither quick nor slow, ever following the pulse of the world.

The air that Zhang Lie inhaled took on the form of dragons. As he exhaled, those dragons coiled around his body and transformed into genetic energy. Behind Zhang Lie appeared swimming pale blue fish. His pale blue genetic energy billowed out from him and transformed into a sea that filled the trial world.

Waves charged forward, lapping the shore, sounding like peals of thunder, like stampeding hooves.

The pale blue fish behind him transformed into pitch-black serpents as the sea turned dark. Waves roared through the skies like galloping steeds, like thundering dragons. The surface of the sea frothed with angry waves, like dragons emerging with the tide.

The black serpent transformed into a whitegold tiger as Zhang Lie's genetic energy seemed to mutate. The black sea turned radiant gold, and the serpents that constituted it turned into countless sharp blades. The entire sea transformed into crystal.

As the ground quaked, the whitegold tiger turned into a black dragonturtle. Four ancient tablets appeared in the sky, each filled with abstruse and incomprehensible runic text. The text flowed out of the tablets and surrounded Zhang Lie.

One was as heavy as a mountain, the other as light as a feather. One sealed the mind, and the other turned space sluggish. The four dragonturtle tablets began to resonate as one, sending ripples that melded with the space and forming an absolute domain over all things within and without.

The crystalline sea began to ripple continuously.

The black dragonturtle transformed into a flaming red lion, causing the crystalline sea to froth and turn a vivid blood red. It looked like flames blazing through the air, scarlet steam rising from the sea and distorting space.

With a huge rumble, the flaming lion transformed into bolts of lightning that filled the air, which manifested in the form of a wyrm. The scarlet steam burst apart and transformed midway through into an endless field of lightning.

Wind and storm surged. The lightning transformed into a raging tempest and rainbow clouds, while the wyrm transformed into a phoenix.

Its physical body continued to evolve. The transformation of his physical body fused his flesh, organs, and bones together, combining them into a single entity.

Three days passed in the blink of an eye. Zhang Lie recycled the waste energy he had emitted and opened his eyes. His pupils were bright and filled with vital energy, with a spiritual glow that made him look like a supernatural entity. It was obvious that he had broken through and elevated himself to an entirely new level of strength.

As Zhang Lie stood up, the trial world seemed ready to burst. Spirituality illuminated him from within and without. He sat cross-legged like a deity, with a luminous haze surrounding him and seeping into his body.

The membranes that surrounded his bones and organs had vanished, absorbed into his body and replaced by the essence of divinity.

Spiritual energy seeped into every portion of his being.

Zhang Lie: an emperor-grade lifeform

Techniques: Rippling Walk (pinnacle), Three-Wave Crescendo (pinnacle), Calm Waters (pinnacle), Fists of the Silent Sea (pinnacle), The Boundless Blade (pinnacle), Eclipse (pinnacle), Syzygy (pinnacle), Ninesoul Dragonblade (pinnacle), Blade of the Heavens (pinnacle)

Genes: Basic, 160; Mutated, 150; Superior, 150; Peak, 150; Disaster, 150; Monarch, 0; Emperor, 0

Soulshards: White Grub (superior), Blood Ant (superior), Potbellied Toad (mutated), Eternalspring Cocoon (superior), Dragonwolf (superior), Moonlight Wyrm (peak), Golden Roc (peak), Dragonwhale (disaster), Mismeld Clam (disaster), Limitless Universe (monarch)

Zhang Lie stepped across the space with just one step, returning to the pocket space that Bu Wentian was in. Bu Wentian had witnessed Zhang Lie's ascension himself, and he had opened a portal for Zhang Lie. He was naturally aware of Zhang Lie's return.

Bu Wentian scanned Zhang Lie. "You've grown far stronger than before. Perhaps you really can win the Galactic Rising Stars Cup."

Chapter 1382: The Final Trial

Not only had Zhang Lie maxed out his disaster gene fragments, the phoenix transformation of his Ninecarp Transformation had reached an intermediate stage. His combat power had increased by leaps and bounds.

"How's everyone doing?"

Zhang Lie knew very well whether or not the members of Team Zenith could make it through all six stages of the trial; after all, he was familiar with all their strengths.

"They're all at the last stage," Bu Wentian replied.

The members of Team Zenith boasted excellent performance, and it was only a matter of time before they succeeded.

Bu Wentian continued, "I obtained pretty good data from your fight."

Zhang Lie replied, "That was a very annoying disaster-grade lifeform to fight."

It boasted the key characteristics of all the disaster-grade lifeforms that he had faced during the trial. Even Zhang Lie had found it difficult to deal with; the others would have an even harder time.

Bu Wentian replied, "I intend on using it to replace the six-headed lifeform that appears in the trial. If there are other challengers like you and your companions, who are so rude as to destroy these trial worlds, I might release one chimera for a stage in your trials."

Zhang Lie's lips twitched. "Are you that petty?"

Bu Wentian rolled his eyes. "Do you think a trial world is that easy to construct?"

"If you can't handle it, why bother making one at all? And to forbid others from damaging it..."

Bu Wentian didn't want to focus on this issue. He changed the topic. "Your final technique was excellent. If it doesn't have any significant drawbacks, I'm certain you'll be able to make it into the top ten of the Rising Stars Cup."

"I want to be the very top," Zhang Lie replied.

The first-place prize was the flower of universal life. To save Zhang Hanxiang, this would be a necessity.

Bu Wentian shook his head. "The Rising Stars Cup isn't as easy to win as you're hoping. There will be many unexpected strong opponents that you'll have to face. This cup is meant for the top hunters of every galaxy. Your final technique was very strong, but there are sure to be even stronger opponents during the Cup. Your performance just now would be insufficient to become champion."

"I have stronger techniques I didn't use," Zhang Lie replied.

Bu Wentian smiled in surprise. "I eagerly await your performance in the cup, then."

Zhang Lie asked, "Won't you tell us any information? If we are to attend this Galactic Rising Stars Cup, don't you think you need to tell us about what this 'Galactic' represents?"

Bu Wentian shook his head firmly. "It's not yet time for you to know."

"At the very least, you should tell us what your opponents in the Cup will be like!"

Bu Wentian shook his head. "You'll learn about it as and when it becomes necessary."

Zhang Lie snorted. "If I'm not mistaken, these are hunters from other universes, aren't they?"

Bu Wentian sighed. "Don't try to guess it. It won't make a difference whether or not you know. You'll have to fight them to win, after all."

"Was I right?"

Bu Wentian sighed again. "I told your parents about this information the year of their competition, and it impacted their performance negatively. Had I not told them in advance, perhaps the outcome would have been different..."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Hold on, what did you say?"

"Your companions have made it past the final stage."

While Zhang Lie and Bu Wentian were chatting, the members of Team Zenith had made it through the final stage of the trial.

Except for Yang Ze, who barely survived Radiant Sun's final attack, the remaining members of Team Zenith had all won by destroying Radiant Sun's vase.

The difference was that he still had plenty of reserves and stamina after the fight, while the members of Team Zenith had used up much of their strength.

Bu Wentian had a sip of tea. "I thought that it was shocking enough for Zhang Lie to have destroyed Radiant Sun's vase, but for most of you to have done the same... Very well done."

The members of Team Zenith glanced left and right, scrutinizing the old Bu Wentian, along with the mysterious space that they had been transported to.

Bu Wentian praised, "You've broken a record. There were only six hunters who had made it past the sixth stage of the trial before all of you, but you've immediately doubled that number to twelve! Among the initial six, three of them drew out the match and barely managed to survive the bejeweled vase's ultimate attack, and the other two managed to perish together with Radiant Sun in the final explosion that resulted."

Zhang Lie gave Bu Wentian a small kick.

"Senior, you're talking too much!"

Upon seeing the familiar figure behind Bu Wentian, everyone's faces lit up in delight.

"Captain!"

Zhang Lie praised, "You've all done very well, and you've improved tremendously since the third realm."

Zhang Lie had witnessed each of their fights during the sixth trial, and the members of Team Zenith had indeed performed in an exemplary fashion.

They smiled at each other in pride, as though Zhang Lie's praise were the highest honor.

Sun Xiaowu still seemed a little shaken. "Captain, was that trial something that really happened?"

Zhang Lie replied, "It was a trial, but it was also part of this senior's memory. We too will be having similar experiences of our own."

Sun Mengmeng asked, "Captain, this is..."

Bu Wentian responded, "I'm Bu Wentian. In the past, others called me Heavenly Monarch Wentian, but I'm nothing more than a remnant of a soul in the trial-taker's chamber, now."

The members of Team Zenith turned to Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Don't look at me. I don't know anything but his name."

Yang Ze asked, "Heavenly Monarch Wentian? Could this elder have been a hunter of the fifth realm?"

Fang Yi's focus was on a different matter. "Hold on, Captain! You mentioned that we would be having a similar experience—what do you mean?"

Zhang Lie replied, "The sixth stage of the trial that all of you have just experienced is part of the Galactic Rising Stars Cup that this senior took part in as a budding hunter. We will all be taking part as well."

Sun Mengmeng asked, "Is the Galactic Rising Stars Cup hosted in the Milky Way Galaxy?"

Bu Wentian murmured, "Are you really planning on attending with this group of cultivators?"

"Isn't that what we agreed on?" Zhang Lie asked.

Bu Wentian replied, "You would be able to participate just fine, and you could easily make the top ten, but your companions are quite a bit weaker."

Sun Xiaowu asked, "Didn't we just pass the sixth stage of the trial?"

Bu Wentian rolled his eyes. "That's only sufficient to get you through the qualifiers."

Yang Ze coughed. "Does that mean that you failed to make it through the qualifiers too, Senior?"

Bu Wentian coughed. "That's not the point. If you want to participate in the Cup, you'll have to exhibit your strength."

"How? Do we have to fight with you, Senior?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

Bu Wentian waved a hand. "I'm just a soul fragment without much ability to fight. You might easily best me."

"What should we do, then?" Sun Mengmeng asked.

Bu Wentian smiled. "I have a final trial for all of you."

"A final trial?" Everyone gaped.

"You may choose whether or not to participate in this trial. Regardless, you may not qualify for the Cup."

The hunters of Team Zenith looked at each other. Sun Mengmeng asked, "Can we have a look at the trial first?"

Chapter 1383: E-Sports

Bu Wentian continued, "I've replicated the eidola of the five successful challengers based on their records during the trial. The strength of each eidolon corresponds to their combat strength when they took the trial. Just like some games from the Milky Way, the rewards for this final trial will be provided in stages. Defeating the first eidolon yields a copper chest, defeating two yields a silver chest, and..."

Before the platform was a stone tablet on which six names were carved. The name on the very top was Zhang Lie; the second was Zhang Yangyan, his father; the third was Han Lingxin, his mother; the fourth was Azathoth; the fifth was Aforgomon; and the sixth was Bast.

Sun Mengmeng immediately replied, "I give up."

Bu Wentian blinked, then asked, "Why so suddenly? You don't even know about the details!"

Sun Mengmeng pointed at Zhang Lie's name at the very top of the tablet.

"With our captain around, we would never be able to pass this trial."

Bu Wentian replied, "This is only an eidolon of Zhang Lie, and it represents but a portion of his strength."

Sun Xiaowu replied, "Although I would like to give it a try, I'm not confident I'll be able to succeed."

Bu Wentian sighed. "I understand how you feel. Zhang Lie is truly an exception even among exceptions, and it would be near-impossible to beat him. How about this? I won't ask that you beat Zhang Lie, only Zhang Yangyan. That would be sufficient to demonstrate your strength."

The members of Team Zenith suddenly grew more upbeat. "If it's not our captain, then we're fine!"

Sun Xiaowu nodded. "I won't be scared of anyone besides my captain!"

Sun Mengmeng, scrutinizing the tablet carefully, asked, "Captain, does this Zhang Yangyan bear any connection to you?"

Yang Ze asked jokingly, "You're not related, are you?"

Zhang Lie didn't hide the truth. "That's my father."

"Your father made it here too, Captain?"

Zhang Lie nodded.

Sun Xiaowu shrunk back down. "I suddenly feel unwell..."

Fang Yi asked, "Can we get a different test?"

Li Feng said, "Our captain's father's likely very strong too... What if you let us stop at this challenger, Han Lingxin?"

Zhang Lie said, "That's my mother."

The members of Team Zenith:...

Bu Wentian sighed. "I won't lower the requirements any longer. In truth, you all aren't weaker than that couple from back then. Be confident in yourselves."

With Bu Wentian's encouragement, the members of Team Zenith trudged up on stage.

Because Zhang Yangyan's eidolon boasted only part of his strength and had limited intelligence, the members of Team Zenith were able to defeat even him handily. Confident from their streak of successes, the members of Team Zenith all challenged the eidolon of Zhang Lie, only to have their confidence crushed.

Although the eidolon of Zhang Lie only boasted a fraction of his data, and before he had maxed out his disaster gene fragments at that, the challengers were unable to touch him.

The difference between an emperor-grade lifeform and a monarch-grade one was immense. Even a fraction of Zhang Lie's strength was sufficient to overwhelm the members of Team Zenith.

The only one who could fight it to a tie was, unexpectedly, Yang Ze.

Yang Ze continuously dodged Zhang Lie's eidolon using his spatial and dodging abilities. Because Zhang Lie's eidolon possessed only rudimentary intelligence, it was frequently tricked by Yang Ze's techniques. In the end, Bu Wentian impatiently declared the match a tie.

Everyone else was beaten to a pulp. The members of Team Zenith grumbled.

"Our captain's too strong!"

"Is this really within the limits of a normal human being?"

"Those techniques are far too powerful!"

Yang Ze, on the other hand, grinned proudly. "It's your techniques that aren't up to par. You had better all train harder."

Sun Xiaowu thundered, "Fight our captain head-on, then!"

Yang Ze's grin widened. "Mastery over space is part of my repertoire."

Fang Yi smirked. "Try the same techniques on Zhang Lie, then, not just his eidolon."

Yang Ze was forced into silence.

Bu Wentian clapped his palms. "Alright. I've viewed all your battles, and I acknowledge your strength. It won't be an issue for any of you to participate in the Galactic Rising Stars Cup."

Sun Mengmeng began, "Captain, isn't it time that you told us about this Cup?"

Zhang Lie shrugged. "I don't know myself. Elder Bu Wentian is insisting on being very mysterious."

Bu Wentian sighed. "The Cup deals with too much sensitive information that I can't tell you about just yet. You'll find out for yourself once you enter the fifth realm."

Sun Xiaowu wheedled, "If we'll know sooner or later, won't you tell us some details now?"

Bu Wentian, however, had no intention of explaining. His hands clasped behind his back, he commanded, "Follow me."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Is the Cup being held in the fourth realm?"

Bu Wentian brought the hunters down a long hallway and into a great hall, within which were a number of silver coffins.

Sun Xiaowu asked curiously, "Elder, who rests in these eight coffins?"

Bu Wentian replied, "All of you will lie within these coffins."

Zhang Lie frowned, and the members of Team Zenith grew noticeably wary.

Bu Wentian explained, "The Galactic Rising Stars Cup isn't being held in the dimensional world, nor in the Milky Way, but rather in what you might consider a virtual reality, much like those back in the Milky Way. These eight coffins—I mean, these eight apparatuses—are how you may access this alternate reality, much like the teleportation apparatuses that connect the Milky Way to the dimensional world.

Sun Xiaowu gaped. "Elder, this Cup that you've been so mysterious about—is it just e-sports?!"

Yang Ze sighed. "Elder, you made us all anxious for nothing! All this mystery, all this about a final trial—and we're just playing an online game?"

Li Feng grumbled, "I'm having a hard time reconciling my expectations with this sort of answer..."

Bu Wentian rolled his eyes. "I said it was similar to online games, not that it would be the same. Do you think I'd waste all this time, effort, and resources just for an e-sports team? Am I that bored, or that rich?"

Sun Xiaowu laughed awkwardly. "I did think that way..."

Bu Wentian scowled. "Is your brain that of a pig? Why would I wait for an eternity just to build a dream team for e-sports? That would be a complete waste!"

Sun Mengmeng replied diplomatically, "We apologize for the misunderstanding, Elder. Could you explain the Cup to us?"

"The space you are about to enter is no ordinary game world. It's difficult to explain the specifics, but put simply, your strength and abilities will be projected into a special world. Everything there is simultaneously real and illusory."

Chapter 1384: A Virtual Reality

Zhang Lie asked, "A realm that lies between the real and the illusory?"

"You can think of it that way, but it's not fully accurate. I'm not too sure about the details myself—after all, it's technology that the Milky Way doesn't possess. It uses a so-called 'real projection' technique in which all damage taken will be directly reflected on one's soul. Dying in that space will cause significant mental trauma, the sort that takes years to recover from."

The hunters nodded with superficial understanding.

Bu Wentian continued, "Furthermore, a portion of the benefits you obtain in that world can be directly transferred to reality."

Zhang Lie asked, "You can transfer the items in-game, I mean, in this special dimension, back to reality?"

Bu Wentian shook his head. "Nothing so fantastic. Only a portion of your strength, not mentally, but related to your corporeal body."

Sun Xiaowu scratched his head. "I'm getting confused with all this terminology. Why don't you provide an example?"

Bu Wentian continued, "For example, the rewards for the top ten places in the Cup..."

Zhang Lie asked, "Are there other rewards beyond the flower of universal life?"

"Indeed. In addition to that flower, the top ten participants will obtain a chance at genetic expansion."

"What's that?"

Bu Wentian hummed for a moment. "It's much like the limit-breaking potions you developed in the Milky Way."

Zhang Lie gaped. "Something that can increase the number of gene fragments you possess?"

Bu Wentian smiled mysteriously. "You'll know once you experience it."

Zhang Lie grumbled, "Elder, won't you give us any useful information at all?"

Bu Wentian shrugged. "I don't know either. As you know, I was defeated in the qualifiers, and all I know is what I've heard from the sidelines, things like 'if you can expand your genes, you'll stand at the peak of the manifold galaxies'. Indeed, all those who experience this procedure, as long as they don't perish, have become paragons of their kind, leaders of their race. I'm not fully aware of the details of this genetic expansion, and I'm guessing that it's like your limit-breaking potions."

The hunters were speechless. Bu Wentian had pretended to be a wise sage, but he actually knew nothing!

Bu Wentian continued, "I heard that the higher you place, the better the benefits you receive."

Sun Xiaowu raised a hand. "Elder, I heard you mention the Milky Way several times during your description. May I ask if you were one of the strongest hunters of the Milky Way?"

This time, Bu Wentian didn't reply mysteriously. He nodded directly.

Sun Xiaowu asked, "How did you come to possess all this technology that the Milky Way doesn't possess?"

Bu Wentian sighed again. "You'll learn once you reach the fifth realm. It's a cruel reality, but you need to face it head-on."

Sun Xiaowu asked, "Elder, you keep mentioning the fifth realm—but won't you tell us where it is, what it's like, and your role in it?"

Bu Wentian shook his head. "You'll learn about everything once you reach the fifth realm."

Sun Xiaowu guessed. "Does that mean you were a major figure there, Elder?"

Bu Wentian smiled mysteriously. "You'll learn about everything once you reach the fifth realm."

No matter how the hunters asked about it, Bu Wentian's answer was always that they would learn everything upon their ascension. In the end, the hunters gave up asking for more information.

Sun Xiaowu pointed at the apparatuses. "Why would these supposedly miraculous apparatuses look like silver coffins? You can tell us that much, can't you?"

Bu Wentian shrugged. "This was all I could order. What other choice do I have?"

He had... ordered these apparatuses?

Bu Wentian shrugged. "There are more than ten days left before the Cup. Zhang Lie's another matter, but the rest of you aren't strong enough. You'll need special training."

"Training? How?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

Bu Wentian replied, "I have a few devices left in the trial chamber, which I can calibrate to generate all sorts of strong enemies to fight against you. You can even fight against your own selves to check on your deficiencies."

Sun Mengmeng asked, "You even had a cultivation program, Elder?"

Bu Wentian sighed. "This is part of my tale of woe. I had once dreamt of helping produce a hunter of legends, but... well, I won't keep going. It only ends in tragedy, anyway. At any rate, the equipment is here and functional for your training. You're still a little weaker than I had hoped for, but you all show talent and promise. Ten days' worth of focused training will be able to increase your strength by quite a bit."

Sun Mengmeng raised her hand. "Elder, we're more than willing to cooperate, but could we get some time to rest? I'm a bit tired after all that fighting for the final trial, especially against our captain's eidolon."

The other members of Team Zenith nodded.

Bu Wentian recalled their matches. "That's true. It wouldn't be appropriate to continue high-intensity training after this much fighting. Let me prepare some rooms for you all, as well as food. Do you have any dietary preferences?"

Sun Xiaowu rolled his eyes. "Elder, do you think all of us who have fought tooth and nail to ascend to the fourth realm all the way from the first would have anything we wouldn't eat?"

If fourth-realm hunters shared anything in common, it was that they were all gluttons who would eat anything.

Yang Ze rubbed his stomach. "Anything that doesn't taste too bad would be great."

Bu Wentian replied, "Some peak-grade lifeform meat, then. I have plenty of stock, and it's high in nutritious value and excellent in replenishing stamina."

He vanished in a flash of light.

Sun Mengmeng asked, "Captain, what do you think of Elder Bu Wentian?"

Zhang Lie frowned. "I've been observing him all this time, and he seems reliable for the moment."

Sun Xiaowu seemed surprised. "Do you think he might harm us?"

Yang Ze laughed. "There are all sorts of oddities about him, don't you think? He claims to be a Milky Way hunter, but possesses all manner of technology that the Milky Way doesn't possess. We've also never heard of his name, and he answers every question with the same refrain: we'll find out when we reach the fifth realm. We might be able to trust this man for now, but not fully and not for good."

Zhang Lie nodded. "Yang Ze said exactly what I wanted to."

Li Feng asked, "And what about this Galactic Rising Stars Cup?"

Zhang Lie's eyes shone with confidence and dominance. "Let's try to participate and get first place."

Seeing how confident Zhang Lie was, the members of Team Zenith naturally calmed down and smiled.

"Well, if you say so, Captain, let's participate and all get into the top ten."

With a flash of light, Bu Wentian appeared before them. "Your rooms are ready, and I've placed the rewards you requested in your individual rooms."

Bu Wentian brought them to an upscale building.

Chapter 1385: Despicable

The building had seven rooms, each with their names affixed. Bu Wentian vanished in a flash of light.

The hunters entered their own rooms. The decor was sparse and ugly, but functional and spacious. There was a bathroom and a large bed. After Zhang Lie showered, he noticed that a large desk in the common area had been filled with all sorts of food. Sun Mengmeng held out a bottle of white fluid. "This is what you wanted, Captain!"

It was the metamorphosis potion that Zhang Lie had wanted. Sun Xiaowu asked, "Right, what did all of you take as your reward?"

Fang Yi smiled mysteriously. "You'll see."

Yang Ze said, "I wanted to augment my spatial affinity. The elder gave me a treasure map, telling me that what I wanted lay within. Let's go check it out after the Galactic Rising Stars Cup."

The others all nodded. After finishing the high-quality genetic lifeform food, the hunters all retired to their rooms, where the members of Team Zenith began their special training. Zhang Lie had intended to participate, but after breaking three sets of Bu Wentian's training gear, he was escorted out.

Bu Wentian pleaded, "I can't train you, so stop ruining my equipment! This isn't cheap."

Zhang Lie had no choice but to avoid participating. He headed out to have a chat with Li Qianlin.

Li Qianlin had no issue being in the airship on her own. Zhang Lie asked Bu Wentian for a few books, which he handed to Li Qianlin. After a short chat, he returned to his room. The dozen or so days passed quickly, and the Galactic Rising Stars Cup was right about to begin.

After the intense special training from Bu Wentian's high-tech training equipment, the members of Team Zenith had all grown visibly stronger.

Bu Wentian explained, "The qualifiers for the Galactic Rising Stars Cup will take place in the form of arena duels, which you've all already experienced in the trial. Based on your assigned number, you'll be sent to different arenas. Win three times to ascend; lose twice and be disqualified. That said, just one loss might disqualify you."

"Why?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

Bu Wentian replied, "Do you remember what I told you yesterday?"

"What do you mean?"

"You'll be sent to a projected space, and all damage taken will be directly reflected on your soul. Dying in that space will cause significant mental trauma, the sort that takes years to recover from."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Being injured in that projected space will lead to injuries in reality, too?"

Bu Wentian shook his head. "No external injuries, but you can suffer mental ones. Small wounds won't make a difference, but major injuries could cause damage to your psyche at a roughly three-to-one ratio, say. If you incur sufficient mental damage, you'll be sent out of the projection immediately, without being able to return. As a result, if you feel as though you're about to lose, you should surrender immediately."

Everyone nodded.

Bu Wentian continued, "That said, it's very difficult to make such a judgment in the heat of battle, so all of you need to be prepared for the worst."

The hunters all understood this point.

"In the Cup, there are two things you'll have to pay particular attention to, a race and an... existence that seems like an alien race. The race you'll have to take note of is the Splitsilver race."

Sun Xiaowu asked, "Are the members of this race particularly strong?"

Bu Wentian shook his head. "Not strong, but rather despicable."

Everyone seemed surprised.

Bu Wentian explained, "The Splitsilvers are widely recognized to be unethical. They're willing to do anything to seize victory. They're far more vicious than you might expect, and they've been known for these sorts of deeds during every iteration of the cup. Their favorite approach is to use external hacks. If I recall correctly, my first opponent was from the Splitsilver race."

Everyone thought back to the sixth trial and the silvery-white figure they had taken down.

Bu Wentian continued, "I use 'external hacks' literally, not metaphorically."

Sun Xiaowu frowned. "Hold on, this game, no, this virtual reality can be hacked?"

Bu Wentian replied, "Certainly not. The virtual reality has what is essentially its own antivirus system, and the realm has its own will, which serves a similar role as game administrators. Any who are discovered to be using an unauthorized external appliance will have their qualifications stripped and their psyche severely injured, but the Splitsilver race somehow has the ability to bypass this restriction."

"How?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

Bu Wentian replied, "Ever since they successfully took advantage of this ability during the first Galactic Rising Stars Cup, they've been using it ever since. Their first hacks were a void targeting hack and a fleeing hack."

Zhang Lie recalled how, during the fight against the silvery-white figure, a group of figures had been reciting some sort of strange scripture, which suppressed his abilities.

Sun Xiaowu recalled that experience as well. He gaped. "I thought that was a racial ability!"

Yang Ze added, "I thought the same."

Bu Wentian rolled his eyes. "External support is expressly forbidden in the arena.

The Splitsilvers are taking advantage of the connection between the arena and the spectators' stands in some complicated manner I'm not fully aware of. The arena and spectators' stands are like two separate spaces linked via virtual reality. In the virtual world, a link tethers them together, and the Splitsilvers take advantage of this link to develop all sorts of hacks."

Zhang Lie replied, "I understand this void targeting hack now, but what's this about a fleeing hack?"

Bu Wentian replied, "When a member of that race is unable to fight, they'll attempt to flee via other members of their race from the audience stands. You saw that happen during the trial, didn't you?"

Zhang Lie frowned. "Does that count as a hack?"

To Zhang Lie, it seemed as though two members from the audience had hopped onto the arena and dragged away the fallen competitor.

"This is indeed against the rules," Bu Wentian confirmed. "The Splitsilver race is making use of some unknown loophole to bypass it, resulting in what you saw."

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Regardless, this all seems very strange."

Bu Wentian continued, "The first match exploited a loophole. The second match, both combatants exhausted themselves. The third match, well, I don't have to say more."

Who wanted to dwell on their failures?

Sun Xiaowu seemed perplexed. "What's the point of escaping?"

Bu Wentian replied, "As I said, you'll be sent to a projected space, and all damage taken will be directly reflected on your soul. Dying in that space will cause significant mental trauma. This fleeing hack is to prevent this sort of situation from happening. It's a rather limited hack, so others turned a blind eye, but the void targeting hack was banned after its first use."

Chapter 1386: A Dark Horse

"The hack was banned?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

Bu Wentian nodded.

Zhang Lie shrugged. "Isn't that the end of the story, then?"

Bu Wentian smiled wryly. "The problem is that the Splitsilver race continued to develop all manner of strange hacks. One of them was some sort of energy transfer mechanism that made use of the tether between the audience stands and the arena to infuse energy to combatants on stage, allowing them to fight longer and with stronger attacks."

Sun Xiaowu frowned. "Doesn't anyone care?"

Yang Ze asked, "Can the Splitsilver race avoid being banned from the Cup?"

Li Feng commented, "Generally, hacks can only be patched after they're reported..."

Bu Wentian shrugged. "That's right. Whenever their hacks are reported, the will of the virtual realm will strengthen and reinforce its algorithms to prevent the same thing from happening again, but the Splitsilver race manages to find new loopholes each time."

Zhang Lie's lips twitched. "Isn't that so..."

Bu Wentian shrugged. "The last iteration of the Cup, the Splitsilver race unveiled a new hack, which can duplicate an attack ten thousand times over."

"Ten thousand times over!"

The hunters gaped.

"That openly?"

"Surely there was reprisal?"

"They really are arrogant, aren't they..."

Bu Wentian shrugged. "They were banned after the fight, of course, but all those Splitsilver combatants that used the hack would have lost their matches otherwise."

Sun Xiaowu frowned. "So since they were going to lose regardless, they might as well have fun while they're at it?"

Their opponents wouldn't have a good time, either. If significant damage could result in mental trauma that took years to recover from, then their opponents wouldn't be able to proceed in the Cup as well.

Zhang Lie's face turned cold. "Not only do they have inferior skill, they're even willing to turn to such underhanded tactics to take down their opponents with them?"

Sun Mengmeng nodded. "This is truly vile."

"They're essentially self-destructing."

Once the Splitsilver combatants used such a hack, they would be banned and dealt significant mental trauma, just like their opponents.

Bu Wentian shrugged. "The year the Splitsilver race unveiled such a hack, they ruined many a promising genius. Countless races called for the Splitsilver race to be barred permanently from the cup."

Zhang Lie asked, "Didn't the committee do anything?"

Bu Wentian replied, "The rules of that virtual realm aren't so easy to change. At the very least, it can't bar a whole race of competitors from competing. But don't worry, the void targeting hack has been patched."

"And the other hacks?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

"You had better be careful."

Zhang Lie frowned. "How is it that this race can always develop new hacks for each iteration of the cup?"

Sun Xiaowu nodded. "What benefit does this bring their race? Are they just doing it for fun? To destroy other competitors like that—they really are malicious!"

Yang Ze frowned. "Doing this each iteration of the Cup—can they sell their hacks for profit?"

Bu Wentian shrugged. "In some sense, that's what they're doing. They use special techniques to learn about and understand the fundamental principles behind the space, as well as develop compatible technology for it. Their behavior is despicable, but they are one of the stronger races in the galaxies—nothing like the truly strong, of course, but their ability to distort reality and illusion is difficult to handle for most."

Although using hacks in the Cup would result in permanent bans and significant mental trauma, the Splitsilver race clearly didn't mind.

"Ignoring the ban, the mental trauma isn't crippling. It won't result in permanent damage, and one can recover from it with time. Indeed, the ability to experience a virtual space that straddles reality and illusion is of particular value to the Splitsilver race, and their hacks in the Cup result in more benefit to their cultivation than dedicated training."

The hunters gaped. Being banned was beneficial to the Splitsilvers?

Bu Wentian shrugged. "That's why there are always Splitsilver competitors trying to hack the Cup."

Sun Xiaowu asked, "Where does the Milky Way rank among the various galaxies?"

Bu Wentian laughed out loud. "Haha, you won't want to know the answer, trust me."

Zhang Lie asked, "What's the other race we have to be wary of?"

"It's another special race, but one unrelated to the Splitsilvers. This race isn't particularly large, but every member of the race is exceptionally strong, especially for this iteration of the Cup. Allegedly, one participant this year is even stronger than Radiant Sun, who was considered to be undefeated. He's known as an invincible martial god—the son of Radiant Sun, Resplendent Sun."

Zhang Lie frowned. "Radiant Sun? Where have I heard that name before..."

Sun Xiaowu asked, "Wasn't that the opponent you lost to, Elder?"

Bu Wentian sighed. "Let's not speak of it. Radiant Sun comes from the Solarvine race, which you have to pay heed to."

Zhang Lie asked, "Are there other opponents that we have to watch out for?"

Bu Wentian thought for a moment. "The truly strong races can skip the qualifiers and enter the Cup proper. Except for the Solarvine race, you shouldn't encounter anyone else exceptional."

Bu Wentian looked at the time. "The competition's about to begin. All of you had better go. I'll be watching from the stands. I've already registered for the cup in your name, so once you enter the apparatuses, you can enter the arena directly."

The hunters headed into their 'coffins', the lids of which slid shut. Within the pitch-black space, an interface appeared: 'Enter the Galactic Rising Stars Cup venue?'

Zhang Lie clicked confirm. A mysterious mental energy suffused him.

Zhang Lie didn't resist the energy and allowed it to envelop himself. He felt a very strange sensation. A set of golden doors appeared before him. He swung his limbs experimentally. Though he might be in a virtual realm, all the sensations he could feel were extremely realistic, as though he were in his own body. He stepped through the doors and toward a stairway to heaven.

The shining stairway looked as though it were an energetic construct. Opposite him was another set of golden doors. A humanoid figure in silvery white walked down the stairway. Half his body was flesh, and half metal. He shone resplendently and with metallic luster.

Another silvery-white figure followed behind, perhaps in the manner of an attendant or servant.

Zhang Lie hesitated. This was essentially who he had seen in the trial—the Splitsilver race!

Chapter 1387: Splitsilver Braggadocio

Were there many Splitsilver combatants because of how populous their race was? Or did they consider the Cup like a standard trial, sending many of the younger generation over?

The Splitsilver combatant looked very shocked to see Zhang Lie. "A race I've never seen before? You must be from somewhere in the dumps, then, here to participate in the Cup for the first time."

Zhang Lie frowned again.

The Splitsilver combatant continued, "Looks like it's a free win for me, then."

"Isn't that a Splitsilver?"

Zhang Lie turned. All around him, beside the familiar arena, was a large audience stand. Countless figures of light were watching the Cup unfold. Neither their faces nor figures could be seen.

"This is almost like an online forum..."

Everyone was anonymous.

Perhaps because Zhang Lie's opponent was a Splitsilver, who were known for their hacks, Zhang Lie's arena quickly became packed.

Many observers were here to see what sorts of hacks the Splitsilver had prepared for this iteration of the Cup.

The figures of light shouted, "What sorts of hacks will you show us this time around?"

The Splitsilver combatant shouted back, "Slander! Slander and calumny! I'm innocent."

"Innocent? The last iteration of the Cup, I saw one of your fellow competitors execute a hack before getting banned!"

The Splitsilver combatant's face flushed red as he disputed, "We make technological advances. It's technology! How can that be considered hacking?"

The figures of light all roared in laughter, giving the Cup a surprisingly cheerful atmosphere.

Zhang Lie walked up to the arena. "Let's start. Don't waste everyone's time."

The Splitsilver combatant stepped down the stairs, unhurried. "What, are you trying to rush to your death?"

The figures of light wondered, "What sort of race is this? I haven't seen their like before in the previous iterations of the Cup."

"Must be someone weak."

"How unlucky they are to have encountered a Splitsilver from the start!"

"Well, it's a weakling, isn't it? It's doomed to lose anyway."

The Splitsilver combatant waved a hand impatiently. "If you don't want to waste everyone's time, you should surrender. You don't stand a chance, after all."

"Do you think you're sure to win with your hacks, then?"

The Splitsilver combatant hmped at him. "Against you, a hack would be a waste!"

Zhang Lie curled a finger, taunting him.

The Splitsilver combatant shot forward with a punch straight toward his skull with a silver burst of light.

Genetic energy surged through Zhang Lie's body as he radiated light. Pale-blue genetic energy exploded all around him as he held up an arm in self-defense.

On impact, Zhang Lie was sent flying.

The Splitsilver combatant frowned. "You do have some strength, after all..."

"Meanwhile, it looks like you aren't very strong without your hacks." Zhang Lie slowly walked forward, pale-blue genetic energy surging around him, roiling like the tides.

The Splitsilver combatant in front of him didn't feel any different from the one he had encountered in Bu Wentian's trial. The latter might even have been quite a bit stronger, considering that the latter was surely weakened when pulled from Bu Wentian's memories.

The spectators of light gaped at Zhang Lie.

"Just what galaxy did this strange challenger come from, to be able to fight a Splitsilver combatant to a standstill?"

Although it was well known that the Splitsilver race enjoyed using hacks in the Cup, almost like a local custom of sorts, which the spectators laughed at and anticipated, the Splitsilvers were still a very strong race.

It was therefore astounding to see a Splitsilver combatant being unable to defeat the unknown combatant before him.

With explosive force, divine light radiated from Zhang Lie as he soared into the sky, causing everything around him to shake.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!"

Pale blue genetic energy rippled about Zhang Lie's arms. He flicked his wrists, causing a frightening aura to descend on the world. The sky began to darken, and a fish the size of a whale materialized in the air.

A howling gale swept over the space. As more and more genetic energy gathered around Zhang Lie's arms, it looked as though he were at the heart of a whirlpool.

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.

Ripples of energy spread out from Zhang Lie, warping the space around him. The towering waves looked like enraged black dragons, flooding the space.

The world reverberated with force. As the waves burst apart, the air filled with echoes of Zhang Lie's signature genetic energy, shattering space and swallowing up all life in its vicinity. Light and shadow danced in the air.

The Splitsilver combatant before Zhang Lie was sent flying by a huge wave of force.

"[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!"

Water-attuned genetic energy encircled Zhang Lie's finger as he unleashed devastating sword energy.

One of the Splitsilver combatant's arms was chopped off. A raging shark surfed toward it atop a wave of sword energy.

The Splitsilver combatant cried out as a silver light illuminated the arena.

The silver light shone down with glaring intensity. It broke apart at its highest point and unfolded to form a silver lotus, with formless runes that spread throughout heaven and earth. Silver roots extended from its base and into the natural law of the space.

Zhang Lie felt his body being restrained by the silver roots to such an extent that even moving became difficult.

The Splitsilver combatant wiped at the blood by his lips. "You're rather strong, to be able to push me to this extent, but that's it!"

"Scram! [Ninecarp Transformation]!"

A black serpent materialized behind Zhang Lie, by now so large and so developed that it resembled the world-swallowing serpent Jormungandr. It let out a threatening hiss as its scales clicked together.

Pitch-black genetic energy revolved around Zhang Lie like dark clouds, then exploded forth in his vicinity, immediately dispelling the pressure around himself.

The Splitsilver combatant gaped in fright, and the spectators watched on in shock.

This unknown combatant had just staged an upset!

He had to be the dark horse of this iteration of the Cup.

The Splitsilver combatant, however, suddenly calmed down after seemingly hearing something by his ear. He proclaimed coolly, "I acknowledge that you're a rather strong opponent considering your nameless race, but the Splitsilvers won't go down easily!"

Chapter 1388: Vanquished Smugness

Within the stands, a number of spectators began to glow with silver light. They appeared behind the Splitsilver combatant on stage. Only Zhang Lie could see what was going on; the spectators didn't seem to notice.

The Splitsilver combatants imparted their energy to the silver lotus above the arena, forming an ethereal bridge of energy. The silver lotus glowed brightly, more so than the sun itself.

The glow became an order of magnitude brighter, so much so that it hurt to look toward the silver lotus. The Splitsilver combatant clearly hadn't displayed this level of strength before; this was the effect of a hack.

A large number of roots and tendrils surged toward Zhang Lie.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Zhang Lie punched forward, and the black serpent behind him shot forth, tearing through the roots as it swam toward the silver lotus.

The Splitsilver figures behind the combatant trembled, not having expected that, even working together, they were no match for Zhang Lie.

The combatant himself was stupefied. Why had he never heard of such a fearsome race?

The Splitsilver combatant cried out, "Damn it, hand me back that relic!"

"Claim it yourself if you can!"

Zhang Lie clenched his fist. Pitch-black genetic energy, shot through with gold, surged forth as he punched toward the void. A hurricane spawned, and many of the Splitsilvers on stage were blown away. Their figures almost dissipated. As the attack struck the Splitsilver helpers, their figures in the spectator stands reeled back, as though they had been severely injured.

"As expected, there's a connection there."

Zhang Lie's blow had been infused with karmic energy. The relationship between the arena and spectator stands had been minuscule. With Zhang Lie's limited understanding of karma, it would have done nothing—if not for the Splitsilver hack.

Not only had Zhang Lie deeply wounded the Splitsilver combatant, he had also simultaneously hurt his helpers.

The Splitsilver combatant, either out of shock or because of the damage he had incurred at Zhang Lie's hands, found his body on the verge of dissipating. He roared, "This is impossible, absolutely impossible! No one in the Cup can manage such a feat!"

How could he have heavily wounded his helpers in the spectators' stands while on stage? This was the equivalent of striking a gamer through the computer screen! Only those who wielded the power of karma could achieve such a feat—but how could that be? How could this unknown combatant before him be one such?

If not for the fact that combatants in the Cup had to be under a hundred years old, the Splitsilver combatant might really have believed that he had encountered one of the powers of the world.

Zhang Lie sneered disdainfully. "So this is the strength of you Splitsilvers' hacks? It's not much."

"Damn it! I might not be able to win, but don't think you'll get past the qualifiers, either!"

the Splitsilver combatant howled. The silver lotus in the air began to tremble violently, tarnished though it was from the corrosion of pitch-black genetic energy.

"[Silver Veil - Infinite Reduplication]!"

The silver lotus burst with light. Pinpricks of silver light appeared in the sky, millions upon millions of lotuses hovering in the air blooming and forming a long, white river of light. They expanded as they flowered, reduplicating indefinitely.

The crowds all began to chatter away.

"The Splitsilvers are hacking again! Look!"

"In the end, the Splitsilvers are hacking this year too!"

"To be forced to this point by an unknown challenger... these Splitsilvers are really growing weak, generation after generation!"

"That said, their hacks are growing stronger, too. This is far superior to that thousandfold reduplication from the last iteration. I have to imagine the other combatant will be taken out of commission, too."

"That unknown challenger's rather strong in his own right, isn't he? It's unfortunate that his opponent was a Splitsilver, though."

The tens of thousands of silver lotuses formed a long river in the air, reduplicating the Splitsilver combatant's attack once for each lotus.

"Die!" The Splitsilver combatant waved a hand, sending the river crashing down toward Zhang Lie.

"Is this the power of a hack? It's rather interesting." Zhang Lie's lips curled up. Genetic energy surged forth.

As Zhang Lie activated his monarch-grade limitless universe soulshard, he glowed with stellar radiance, like a burning star. Starlight flowed through his body in phantasmagorical colors. Zhang Lie's body transformed into a glaze of the dark cosmos, as though the Milky Way itself flowed through his body. His aura grew tremendously. He defended with one open palm.

The Splitsilver's attack landed with a huge explosion, splitting the ground, shaking the heavens, and causing the world to break apart. It was a frightening blow that struck with the force of an earthquake.

Zhang Lie's stellar river and the river of white lotuses struck each other in mid-air, causing the arena to crack and natural law to break down. Reality and illusion shook. Auroras formed in the air. The white lotuses began to explode, one after the other, as the stellar river penetrated and decisively crushed the other stream of energy.

The spectators gaped in shock. They stood up in surprise as they watched the fight unfold. Zhang Lie's technique had been so strong that it had bypassed even the Splitsilvers' hacks!

Some of the spectators rubbed their eyes in shock. Others slapped themselves, thinking they were dreaming.

They were certain that the Splitsilver would be undefeated after activating his hack, but Zhang Lie had blocked the blow—and by the looks of it, easily at that.

A tremendous will imposed its consciousness on the world, both on stage and on the spectators' stands. The spectators felt a tremendous pressure, as though the sky was about to fall. The virtual realm's will had manifested itself.

Zhang Lie raised his head. This was the first time he had seen its like, an existence that straddled the real and the illusory. He couldn't inspect it from either perspective individually, but was nevertheless able to sense it somehow.

This was a strange, almost paradoxical, feeling.

Chapter 1389: Birth of a Dark Horse

"A contestant has used a power beyond that permitted by the rules, disrupting the proceedings of the Cup. The contestant's qualifications shall be permanently stripped!"

A flash of white lightning split the air and struck the Splitsilver combatant, who screamed in pain as his body dissipated. Before he vanished, he pointed at Zhang Lie. "We're not done here! Five years later, I'll find you in your galaxy and kill you!"

The Splitsilver combatant's body vanished, leaving the audience in stunned silence—then, they began to cheer.

"A dark horse, the biggest dark horse of this iteration of the Cup!"

"To have survived that Splitsilver hack completely unharmed... Do any of you know what race this is, and what galaxy it's from?"

"This is ridiculous—even that invincible combatant couldn't have fared better!"

"I really want to see this dark horse fight against that competitor now..."

Zhang Lie ignored the crowd. A screen appeared before him: Start matching your second opponent?

Zhang Lie checked that his body was still in good shape, that he hadn't expended much energy against the Splitsilver combatant, before tapping Yes. The text on the screen changed: Matching in progress.

A door of light opened wide above him. One alien walked over, his body covered in golden scales, a pair of divine wings to his back, staring at Zhang Lie. He had three eyes, two where a human's would be, and a third, vertical one at the center of his forehead. His aura was immense, so strong it was almost physical.

Zhang Lie found this opponent surprisingly familiar.

The crowds began to cheer in excitement.

"He's Ling Jin, from the spirit race! His talent is astonishing, and he's considered a spirit king!"

"He's the only combatant in the qualifiers who might be able to fight against the invincible one."

Zhang Lie understood why the combatant seemed so familiar now—he was from the same race as in Bu Wentian's trials. Perhaps because of fate, or the mysterious rules of this virtual realm, his opponent was the strongest member of the spirit race of his generation.

"Well met!"

Ling Jin cupped his palms. He was over two meters tall, and his body shone in gold. He had the aura of a martial god, shining with a blazing corona of light whose might could be felt all over heaven and earth.

A huge noise resounded from the impact of fist against fist, as though an explosion had taken place. Ling Jin howled, his golden hair standing on end. His wings forked open and slashed forward.

Zhang Lie released a flurry of palm strikes to resist the golden wings.

Within moments, the two combatants had exchanged dozens of blows. Golden lightning surrounded them; it looked as though two deities were duking it out in the heavens.

Ling Jin's vertical third eye, situated at the center of his forehead, opened. Runes formed a beam of rainbow light, with a deific chant that struck at Zhang Lie's very soul.

No one would be able to avoid such an attack at close range.

"[Ninecarp Transformation: Golden Tiger]!"

The image of a golden tiger appeared behind Zhang Lie's back, and its roar echoed through the air. A golden aura suffused Zhang Lie. A mountain of blades rested atop the tiger's back, and Zhang Lie's body itself underwent a transformation. His hair turned silvery-white, until they became akin to silver needles.

His genetic energy likewise became more honed. Silvery-white genetic energy gathered over his body, and tigers' stripes appeared on his arms. His eyes became those of a tiger's, and steely sharpness erupted from every pore.

He glowed with stellar radiance, like a burning star. Starlight flowed through his body in phantasmagorical colors. Starlight, golden light, and auroras intersected in the air in a combination of beauty and dominance.

Zhang Lie punched forward, his genetic energy solidifying into crystal and shattering the multicolored beam. The beam of light fizzled as the eye shut again.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

Concentrated genetic energy solidified into sharp silver crystals. Each crystal seemed to harbor an entire universe within. Stellar light formed auroras in the sky, so beautiful that they dazzled the spectators.

The crystals moved extremely rapidly, piercing through Ling Jin's golden wings in the blink of an eye.

Just then, Ling Gu's left hand glowed with light. A spear of red light manifested over his palm, bearing immense power.

Red light flared across the heavens. In that single moment, everything else seemed to darken, leaving only a shining red spear the color of blood. It was only a meter long, but its light seemed to permeate the world. It shone too brightly to be observed directly.

Zhang Lie simultaneously activated his dragonwolf soulshard. His russet fur seemed to glimmer with stellar radiance, each hair a shining star, as though he were draped with the entirety of the Milky Way. His four limbs were armored with a dragon's scales, each a burning golden sun. The two soulshards' power combined.

A dragon's horns grew out of Zhang Lie's forehead, shining with stellar radiance, surrounded by galactic starlight. To others, he would seem to have the boundless energy of a new galaxy.

Zhang Lie swiped forward with his claws. Starlight flooded forward,

The two forces fought for dominion over the sky, neither willing to relent. The sky was covered up by scarlet light in one moment, and by starlight in the next. Both combatants darted back and forth amidst the clashing energies, exchanging blows in a melee.

Eventually, the energies dissipated. Ling Jie was sent stumbling back with the sound of breaking bone. With each step he retreated, he coughed out a mouthful of blood. He had clearly been dealt a severe blow.

The fight between the two combatants was an amazing sight to behold. Ling Jin was stronger than anyone could have imagined, but Zhang Lie, even more shockingly, was stronger still.

Despite his injuries, Ling Jin's aura was as strong as ever. He glowed in golden light, then took an immobile stance, as inevitable and unmoving as a mountain range.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!"

A sea of stars appeared above Zhang Lie's head, shining with crystalline stars. The silver stars fell from the sky, transforming into a rain of meteors.

Ling Jin blocked the falling meteors with his bloody spear. As the battle dragged on, Ling Jin grew more and more wounded, golden feathers torn off his wings, his fresh blood anointing the ground. Even his golden glow seemed to dim.

Ling Jin smiled with his teeth. "I knew I made the right choice in attending the Cup. It was well worth the time to be able to encounter a strong opponent like you."

Zhang Lie condensed his genetic energy. "You're only about as strong as the spirit race combatant I once fought," Zhang Lie replied disdainfully.

Ling Jin seemed simultaneously surprised and curious. "You've fought against another member of the spirit race? Who?"

Zhang Lie thought for a moment. "I've defeated too many opponents to fully remember. If I'm not mistaken, his name was Ling Gu."

Chapter 1390: Your Father Wasn't Great

"Many years have passed since then. How's he doing now?" Zhang Lie asked.

Ling Jin grew so mad that his face turned red. The skies shone with a scarlet haze. "Are you trying to insult me?!"

Zhang Lie was shocked by Ling Jin's sudden outburst.

A silence filled the stands.

Ling Jin's hand, which gripped his blood-colored spear, clenched tightly. Green veins protruded. He shouted fiercely, "Ling Gu is the current spirit king, my father!"

Zhang Lie hesitated.

The audience members murmured to each other, "He claims to have fought Ling Gu, and even to have won against him..."

Zhang Lie hastily explained, "I had no intention of humiliating you, and I didn't know that Ling Gu was your father. However, to be honest, he really wasn't very strong."

"You dare!" Ling Jin thrust forward with his blood spear. Bloody radiance filled the sky, and tremendous pressure descended on the arena. Ling Jin's face was furious, and his spear strike cut through everything in sight.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!"

As Zhang Lie cocked his fist, dozens of crystalline dragons formed behind his back, roaring in unison and causing the arena to tremble.

The next moment, they shot out through his fists.

The crystalline dragons seemed like works of art, filled as they were with a sliver of a universe. An aurora shone from the hearts of each one. The hundreds of crystalline dragons on stage were a lethal technique, as well as a masterwork of art.

Ling Jin's blood spear thrust through one of the crystalline dragons, but there were hundreds of them in all. They linked up one to the other, dissolving Ling Jin's attack before tearing him apart.

Before Ling Jin's figure dissipated, he shouted, "Considering how strong you are, we'll surely meet again in space. Before I kill you, you'd better not die!"

A screen appeared before Zhang Lie: Start matching your third opponent?

As the battle finished, a beam of light fell from the skies. The arena restored itself as Zhang Lie readied himself for the next battle.

A huge crash came from the sky as a set of golden doors appeared in a frightening burst of energy. The figures of light all around knelt on the floor, suppressed by incredible pressure. They slumped to the ground, unable to resist.

Subsequently, a resplendent golden sun appeared, descending with a will so mighty it seemed as though the universe itself had been given physical form. Seated within the sun was a man who seemed like a god, his eyes shut, the source of all the illumination.

The sun bore down on Zhang Lie.

Formless will billowed out from the man, as though no one in the world would be able to halt his advance.

"A race I've never seen before. It looks like the Cup's matchmaking system isn't particularly efficient."

Zhang Lie raised his eyebrows. This new enemy was far too arrogant, to think that he could quash him by physical might alone.

Zhang Lie raised his sword into the air, manifesting a sword will that rose into the heavens, strong beyond human understanding, vast as the ocean.

The man in the golden sun was unmoved, his eyes closed. What manner of pride was this? The man in the golden sun descended from the skies, suppressing Zhang Lie with aura alone.

The sun glowed with splendor. Golden runes patterned the air. Starlight shone through the heavens.

Zhang Lie's sword will struck the sun's divine glow in a resplendent explosion too bright to witness with the naked eye.

The spectators found their souls trembling. Heaven and earth resonated with the will of the sword and the aura of the godlike being within the sun.

This confrontation was one between two paragons.

As the divine light dissipated, the two figures could be seen once more through the blinding haze. Zhang Lie stood on the platform, his robes shifting in the wind, silent and head unbowed. In the sky was a resplendent golden sun, with a saintly man still meditating with eyes closed within.

Neither seemed to have won out in the confrontation; both parties retained their original stances.

The other entity's aura seemed almost deific in origin.

"I know who he is!" one of the spectators shouted, clearly recognizing Zhang Lie's opponent.

"It really is him, Resplendent Sun! The young lord of the Solarvine race, undefeated in battle!"

"He's the third opponent!"

"That member of the Solarvine race who was once called invincible himself acknowledged Resplendent Sun as being above him, conferring upon him the title of undefeated."

"You're strong, stronger than I expected," Radiant Sun commented. "I thought the matchmaking system was in error, to pit me against a member of an unknown race, but it looks like you are worth fighting, after all."

Zhang Lie frowned. This aura was familiar to him. Was this a trick of fate? His final opponent was against Resplendent Sun. Zhang Lie was almost suspicious that Bu Wentian had planned all this in advance.

His body seemed to shine with divine light imbued into his flesh. When he attacked, the world itself would quake.

The void distorted as Resplendent Sun made his move, forming seals with his hands. His left hand invoked the divine moon, his right the great sun. The heavens glowed with divine light, dyeing the skies golden and scorching the air.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!"

Pale blue genetic energy rippled about Zhang Lie's arms. He flicked his wrists, causing a frightening aura to descend on the world. The sky began to darken, and a fish the size of a whale materialized in the air.

A howling gale swept over the arena. As more and more genetic energy gathered around Zhang Lie's arms, it looked as though he were at the heart of a whirlpool.

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.

Ripples of energy spread out from Zhang Lie, warping the space around him. The towering waves looked like enraged black dragons, flooding the area.

The two combatants struck each other in a clash of celestial wills.