

U. Warlord 161

Chapter 161: Su Feng's Worry

"This is our ultimate defense against alien invasions, the famous Blackwind Cannons!" Su Feng introduced proudly.

"Blackwind Cannons? They really are top-grade weapons, aren't they?" Zhang Lie's eyes gleamed. This was the closest he'd ever gotten to such weapons, both in his past life and his current one. Allegedly, at full charge, these weapons could easily kill a monarch-class hunter or an alien battleship.

Su Feng's smile was burnished with pride. After showing Zhang Lie around, he went right to business. "The reason I've called you here today is with regards to the development of these limit fragments, as well as those white-grub cores and growth factors that you've brought up. I've heard that you're publicly selling this valuable military resource!"

"Only in limited quantities," Zhang Lie added.

They were walking toward Su Feng's office.

"Is that so? Good! I've had questions about purchasing more from my superiors, but I've dealt with them all, so you'd better not hide anything from me," Su Feng warned.

"I've been a bit busy with matters in the dimensional world, so I apologize for the delay in handling this matter. Regarding the white-grub cores, I'm happy to provide the military with ten thousand cores for free, but the others will have to be purchased from me. Of course, the military will receive a special discount, but will still be limited in the quantity it can purchase; after all, I only have a finite number of cores left, and I have to keep a few for my dojo," Zhang Lie continued.

Su Feng inclined his head subtly. "It doesn't seem like all that much, but it's likely the best you can do for now. In that case, let's do as you say. What about these growth factors that you've mentioned? Where can they be acquired?"

"In theory, any lifeform similar to these white grubs should produce some limited quantity of growth factors, but the problem is one of scale."

"Do you know if these growth factors can be synthesized or lab-grown?"

"It's not impossible, but it'll require significant research, and I don't have an answer for you at the moment."

"In that case, make this a priority. Access to this breakthrough could significantly enhance mankind's strength relative to the alien races! You're free now, aren't you? Especially after what happened in the Runic Forest."

The commotion that Zhang Lie had caused was apparently significant enough that even Su Feng had heard of it.

"Of course. That's why I'm here to help out today. Has something gone wrong with the foundational breakthrough on your end?"

"Yes, follow me!" Su Feng brought Zhang Lie out of the office and through a pitch-black corridor, with cries and grunts in the distance. Clearly, there were quite a few soldiers training.

"The moment you announced the news of the foundational breakthrough, the military began initial trials for promising recruits, but it seems as though satisfying the third condition regarding adrenaline is particularly difficult for us," Su Feng explained.

Indeed, Zhang Lie recalled that something similar had happened in his past life. After all, soldiers had to face life-threatening danger day in and day out, and their tolerance for such stressful conditions was far superior to those of regular people, even hunters.

"As the hunter who came up with this foundational breakthrough in the first place, I hope you'll be able to resolve this problem," Su Feng told Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie frowned. "I can give it a try, but there's no guarantee that it'll work. Furthermore, I suggest that this training be included as early as possible in the soldiers' regimen, ideally while they're still new recruits."

The breakthrough success rate for seasoned soldiers had, in his past life, been a staggeringly low 3%. This was mainly because of their frightening analytical abilities on the battlefield, as well as their strong sense of duty, loyalty, and honor. They had long since dedicated their lives to their country.

"I'll take your suggestion into account. Then, the field is yours!" Su Feng glanced curiously at Zhang Lie, who had apparently devised a scheme to fix this problem in a matter of moments.

Zhang Lie nodded firmly..

"Welcome to the training chamber for the Blackwind special forces." Su Feng pushed the door open, flooding the corridor in bright light. The shouts and grunts that had seemed muted were now far clearer to the ear, and they could both sense fluctuations in genetic energy from a distance.

The training chamber wasn't any different from a dojo's arena. A number of hunters were fighting against each other, with bursts of genetic energy from time to time. The reinforced floor was wet with sweat. Zhang Lie's gaze swept over the gathered soldiers.

"Assemble!" Su Feng shouted, and the sound of fighting stopped immediately. The soldiers hurriedly assembled into a tidy formation and saluted their commander-in-chief.

Zhang Lie gave a nod of approval. From the speed at which the soldiers had reacted, as well as the skills they had displayed in the arena, it was clear that these were all top-tier troops. They were veteran soldiers, all with rather unstable fluctuations in their aura, as though they had just purged their frameworks and started afresh.

"These are the soldiers that you'll be specially responsible for," Su Feng murmured. "These are the best forces I have. No matter what you do, I hope you'll be able to have them all experience the breakthrough!"

Su Feng looked at Zhang Lie with hope and anticipation, multiplying the stress that Zhang Lie felt.

"Commander, the eighty-one soldiers of the Blackwind special forces team, reporting for duty!"

"At rest! Today's the third day since you all purged your frameworks, but none of you have managed the foundational breakthrough. As a result, I've sent for an external instructor!"

Su Feng glanced at Zhang Lie.

"Commander-in-Chief, we're getting instructed by the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie?" the leader of the special forces team queried, his tone filled with disbelief.

"Yes, he's your new instructor! Do you have a problem with that?" Su Feng replied.

The soldiers' faces changed. Zhang Lie had become rather famous, but he was still just a youth from the first realm. How could he compare to the years of battlefield experience that they all had? Would they accept a twenty-year-old as their instructor so easily?

"Commander-in-Chief, are you certain about this?" the leader of the team, Lin Yue, queried once more.

"Lin Yue, do you doubt my orders?!"

"No, Commander, but—"

"Enough! Treat Instructor Zhang Lie's orders as if they were my own. All offenders will be subject to martial law! Are there any further questions?"

Su Feng stared at all of them. The other soldiers didn't dare speak up. Zhang Lie glanced at Lin Yue with interest.

"No, Commander!" the soldiers chorused as one, but Lin Yue shot a disdainful glance at Zhang Lie before he answered.

"I'll leave the rest to you. Don't disappoint me!"

Of course, Su Feng saw that glance, but he was sure that Zhang Lie would be able to deal with the rest of the situation on his own.

"No problem. But there might be some friction between us in the beginning, so you'd best be prepared," Zhang Lie replied, smiling.

"As long as you don't kill them, do whatever you want!" Su Feng walked out of the training chamber and the doors sealed shut.

The soldiers, who were standing at attention, immediately turned to Zhang Lie.

"Resume training," Zhang Lie commanded.

"Ah, what's going on with my waist?"

"Did you hear my bones creak just now?"

"For some reason, I can't seem to muster up any strength!"

The soldiers' formation suddenly disintegrated into a disorderly mess, and none of them seemed to pay any attention to Zhang Lie.

"Who does this fellow think he is, ordering us around like that?" someone whispered.

Zhang Lie's face was bland, as though he had expected such a thing to happen.

"Lin Yue!"

"Yes!"

"You're the leader of this team, aren't you?"

"Yes!"

"Who was it that spoke just now? Identify them!"

Lin Yue smirked. "I apologize, Instructor, but I can't!"

Zhang Lie eyed Lin Yue. "You heard Commander Su's orders just now, didn't you?"

"Yes, Instructor!" Lin Yue replied, certain that Zhang Lie wouldn't be able to do anything to him.

Zhang Lie grinned back at him wolfishly. "In that case, we'll start with you. Lin Yue, listen up: you're fired!"

All the soldiers looked toward him. Who was Zhang Lie, to think he could fire someone like Lin Yue so easily? To the gathered soldiers, he seemed to be making a fool of himself.

"Haha, this lad isn't crazy, is he?"

"Do you think you can fire our leader just like that? You must be addled!"

Riotous laughter filled the chamber.

Chapter 162: The Veterans' Trial

However, just as the soldiers were laughing at Zhang Lie, Su Feng's voice came from the speakers to the training chamber.

"Lin Yue, get your ass out here! You'll be transferred away immediately!"

Silence took over the chamber; everyone was speechless. Was Su Feng serious? Was their leader really going to be fired from his position?

"Commander—"

"If anyone dares plead for mercy, they'll be transferred out too!" Someone immediately tried to stand up for Lin Yue, but Commander Su shot them down.

Only then did the soldiers in the arena realize just how serious Su Feng was. Lin Yue, despite initially being stricken by the news, quickly calmed down and walked out of the chamber after reassuring several of his comrades that he would be fine, leaving Zhang Lie in charge within the training chamber.

"In truth, if not for Commander Su insisting that I come, I would have refused such an obligation. A minute of my time is worth tens of millions of dollars; do you think I have any interest in your training? I was the one who discovered the foundational breakthrough, who discovered these limit fragments hunters all over the world are lusting over! The reason you've all been asked to purge your frameworks is because of me!

"How dare you call yourselves soldiers if you can't even obey the orders of your commander-in-chief? And you think I'm the fool here?!"

Zhang Lie had managed to anger all the soldiers, but Su Feng's previous orders hung over their heads like a sword of Damocles, and none of them dared make a move against him.

"You all think yourself far more experienced than I am, don't you? That I have nothing worth teaching any of you? I'll give you a chance, then. If you don't think I'm worth your time, step forward and we'll have a practice match, one-on-one."

Zhang Lie's voice wasn't particularly loud, but it caused a stir within the ranks of soldiers. Everyone stared at him, be it in disdain or rage. Zhang Lie knew very well that none of these soldiers respected him, and this would be the key to their breakthrough. He would have to make use of their self-confidence and refusal to back down.

"A one-on-one battle? You're sure, Instructor? We won't take any responsibility if you're too frail to take a single blow!"

Several hulking soldiers stood out from the formation, raring to give Zhang Lie a good beating.

Zhang Lie smirked. "You think I'll be the one begging for mercy?"

"You're quite arrogant, aren't you, Instructor? In that case, let me, Wu Hao, be the one to challenge you!"

The soldiers made way as the hulking Wu Hao walked forward. Wu Hao was the team leader of the special forces' first subdivision, and a peak second-realm hunter with a strength comparable to that of a regular third-realm hunter.

"To be honest, I was impressed by your performance at the capital during the Kez invasion, but I hadn't expected that all these accolades would make you so arrogant! Don't worry, I'll go easy on you. Let me show you just what the real world's like!"

Wu Hao cracked his fingers as he readied to fight.

"Do your worst."

The other soldiers stepped off-stage, leaving the arena to the two of them.

"Brash, impudent youth!" Wu Hao stomped on the ground, which shook slightly. "[Beast King's Tome: Stampede]!"

His muscles suddenly bulged as the shadowy figures of a dozen types of beasts appeared behind him. Even space seemed to distort; if this blow were to land, Zhang Lie would be severely injured.

Zhang Lie remained cool and collected. He circulated his genetic energy, [Mirrored Refraction] on his left, [Three-Wave Crescendo] on his right. Because these hunters had just purged their old frameworks, he was restricting himself only to lower-grade techniques.

The beasts charged forward, but their figures were pulverized and shattered by the combined effects of Zhang Lie's skills. Wu Hao's face fell. He knew that the techniques Zhang Lie was using weren't anything high-grade, but the strength of those techniques was far greater than he had expected.

One blow fell harder than all the others. With a pained grunt, Wu Hao flew out of the arena, a reddening slap clearly visible on his face.

"Trash! As I thought, all of you are trash!"

The soldiers glanced at Zhang Lie with consternation, with shock and smoldering anger. As their representative, Wu Hao's loss was their loss. Even Su Feng, who was monitoring the scene from the cameras scattered around the training chamber, looked rather displeased.

Zhang Lie was clearly trying to trample on Wu Hao's pride, of the pride of all the soldiers in the Blackwind Fort, of the pride of the military itself.

Despite knowing that Zhang Lie wouldn't be doing this for no good reason, Su Feng was still rather upset; it was apparent, then, just how much worse the soldiers themselves would take it.

"You—I'm taking you down!" Wu Hao, who lay stunned on the floor, pushed himself up as he felt his face, then rushed toward Zhang Lie with bloodshot eyes. His unbelievable loss and subsequent humiliation caused adrenaline to flood his body, and he broke through without even realizing it.

Unfortunately, the rampaging Wu Hao wasn't able to take his revenge. Instead, with Zhang Lie's fist ramming into his abdomen, he fell to the floor unconscious. As Zhang Lie placed a boot on Wu Hao's skull, he glanced at the rest of the soldiers disdainfully.

"Trash! You're far too weak! Why don't you all come at me together? That'd save me some time!"

"Together? Zhang Lie, don't think we won't be able to take you down!" one of Wu Hao's good comrades, Lin Wei, shouted, green veins throbbing on his head.

"Oh? How many of you can compare to this blockhead, then?"

Zhang Lie tapped Wu Hao's cheek with the sole of his boot, a devilish sneer appearing on his face.

"Get at him!"

"He's asking for it!"

The soldiers had to admit that Zhang Lie was indeed a strong hunter, and that the rumors circulating about him weren't exaggerated. If he were able to knock Wu Hao unconscious with a single blow, then his strength really was comparable to a third-realm hunter's.

Lin Wei's eyes turned cold as he circulated his genetic energy, as did the fellow soldiers beside him.

"Come at me, you walking dirtbags!" Zhang Lie continued to taunt them.

"We won't go easy on you!" Lin Wei shouted, motioning for everyone to charge forward.

The moment they did so, Zhang Lie activated the technique he had been charging up. Black ripples flooded the arena. The ceiling was replaced by a starry sky and bloody moon, and the floor had turned into an underworld river. A tremendous pressure blocked their advances, forcing them onto the ground. An ancient power seemed to be sucking the genetic energy from their bodies.

"This, this is [Eclipse]?" Lin Wei cried out. Against this overwhelming force, he couldn't even move, let alone attack.

All the soldiers present, even the ones that hadn't made a move, were all kneeling on the ground, unable to force themselves upright.

"I told you, didn't I? Is this all you can accomplish, even with the resources of an entire country spent on you? Trash. Trash! TRASH!"

The floor lit up with explosions of genetic energy as all the soldiers tried to buckle the strength that had felled them all. They wanted to force themselves up, to prove to Zhang Lie that they weren't pieces of trash, that they had slaughtered countless invading lifeforms, that they were warriors lauded with honor and glory!

The soldiers' pained grunts and howls filled the chamber, but the blood moon unrelentingly quashed their efforts. Even as their bones creaked and groaned, none of them were able to get all the way up. Several of the soldiers had fainted of overexertion, and others had unwittingly broken through as their genetic energy flared up.

Su Feng, observing everything from a distance, finally understood what Zhang Lie was trying to do.

"I can't say this is a method I approve of, but the results do speak for themselves," he mused, smiling.

Time seemed to slow tremendously within the domain. Zhang Lie had barely activated it for a quarter of a minute, but that was sufficient time to drain all the soldiers' energy and leave them slumped on the ground.

Their faces were pressed disgracefully against the hard floor, and they couldn't even look Zhang Lie in the eye. The greatest shame they had felt in their lives forced out their bodies' potential.

Lin Wei, who had long since broken through without knowing it, couldn't bear it any longer. "We're soldiers, members of the special forces who look death in the eye! You might be able to best us, but we won't submit to you! Kill us if you dare—we won't give in!"

"Kill you? Subjugate you? Surely not. You're all prized soldiers under Commander Su's care, and I'd hardly dare do anything to you."

Zhang Lie smiled as he deactivated [Eclipse]. As the blood moon vanished, so did the pressure on the soldiers' bodies.

"Alright, the trial is over. You've all done well, everyone. Stand up and feel how your bodies have changed," Zhang Lie casually instructed.

Chapter 163: Short-Term Goals

Trial? What trial? Was everything from before really nothing more than a trial? And what did Zhang Lie mean by the changes to their bodies?

"Ah, my body!"

"No, could it be? I've broken through? When?!"

The elites present might have grown cocky and arrogant because of their skill, but they weren't idiots. They had, one and all, realized what Zhang Lie had accomplished.

"I apologize for my actions, everyone. Whatever doubt I cast on your pride and service was solely for the purpose of inducing your breakthrough; I'm very proud that you soldiers are the ones protecting our country. But this mindset is exactly what makes the standard trial useless for all of you, so I had to come up with a more creative approach instead. If I'm not mistaken, all of you should have broken through by now.

"Congratulations, and, once again, my apologies!"

Zhang Lie bowed toward the gathered soldiers, then left the training chamber.

"As expected!" Su Feng's smile grew more and more intense.

The pioneer of this entire development was far more experienced than he, or any other member of the military. Just this one trial alone had induced a breakthrough in every member of the special forces.

"Commander-in-Chief, this—" Beside Su Feng, Lin Yue still seemed to be rather stupefied by just what had occurred.

"See what you have to learn? Alright, return to the troops!"

"Ah—yes!" Lin Yue felt as though he had been Su Feng and Zhang Lie's pawn all along.

As Zhang Lie headed to the door, Lin Yue, who had rushed back into the training chamber, immediately bowed as he saw Zhang Lie. "Instructor, I apologize for the disrespect!"

Of course, he now understood what Zhang Lie was trying to accomplish, and his words were perfectly genuine.

Seeing Lin Yue apologize, the other troops did the same. "Instructor, we apologize!"

In other words, they had recognized Zhang Lie as their instructor. They blushed at their earlier ignorance and foolishness; after all, they had mocked this seemingly unqualified instructor with their pride and arrogance, but in the end, it had been Zhang Lie who had apologized first.

They glanced at Zhang Lie shamefaced.

"Don't worry. Keep training!" Zhang Lie waved a hand at them as he left the training chamber. The remainder would be easy. Once the troops got used to their additional limit fragments, they would be able to proceed to the next stage of the training.

Su Feng then commanded Zhang Lie to repeat what he had done with a series of other troops; as the skies darkened, Zhang Lie, who had been forced to work the entire day, was finally released from Su Feng's evil clutches.

With the military's affairs settled, next would be the dojo's affairs. By the time he returned to the dojo, it was already late at night, but the Zenith Dojo was still lit up brightly.

Zhang Hong, as well as a number of dojo workers around her, had yet to rest. There were quite a few residents of the slums loitering outside the dojo's entrance; they were anxiously waiting for good news.

After their children had taken the dojo's placement examination, the dojo had told them that results would be out shortly, but they had heard nothing for an entire week. Their patience exhausted, these parents began camping outside the dojo so as to be the first to hear the news.

By the arena, Lin Xiu was leisurely smoking a cigarette. There were quite a few nervous youth up in the arena, each about ten years old. Lin Xiu glanced at them appreciatively.

"Hmm? Ah, may I ask what you're doing so late at night?" Zhang Lie immediately stepped forward.

"Well, thanks to you, even I got assigned a task from Zhang Hong. None of us are allowed to sleep until we finish the selection process!" Lin Xiu scoffed.

Zhang Lie barely hid a smile; he hadn't expected Zhang Hong to be so daring as to cajole Lin Xiu into this as well.

"The Dragonwolf Zhang Lie! It's my first time seeing him in person!"

"Che, what's there to be excited about? Once we enter the Zenith Dojo, we'll be his disciples, and we'll see him frequently!"

"That's true, but he seems so much more handsome in person. Ah, I'm infatuated!"

The youth in the arena all began quietly whispering to each other the moment Zhang Lie showed up, their chatter only dying away as Zhang Lie got closer.

Zhang Lie scrutinized the youth in the arena carefully. Most of them were about ten years old, and based on their attire, most came from the slums.

"All of you want to enter the Zenith Dojo?"

"Yes!"

"Please, Dojo Leader!"

"You're my idol!"

The youth were apparently all very eager to be accepted, though Zhang Lie suspected that much of what they were saying had been taught to them by their parents.

"The Zenith Dojo prizes loyalty above all, and no amount of sweet-talking will get you anywhere," he warned. What he brought up was indeed the first criterion that he had emphasized. "Yes, loyalty!"

His gaze turned cold as he unleashed his aura, causing the children to tremble. At their age, what could they know of loyalty? They had come to the Zenith Dojo mainly because of the existence of Zhang Lie, and the announcement of limit fragments and the foundational breakthrough. Faced with the frightening visage of Zhang Lie, the youth cowered, unwilling to meet his gaze, trembling with fear.

"I swear lifelong loyalty to the Zenith Dojo!" a thin, reedy voice suddenly piped up. A poorly attired child stared steadfastly at Zhang Lie. His eyes were limpid and expectant. His cheeks were smudged with dirt, his shirt and pants tattered and threadbare, and a sour smell lingered on his body.

After his proclamation, the two children beside him also did the same.

Zhang Lie was surprised that a child had responded so quickly, and he glanced curiously at the boy.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Jun Jiuxiao!"

What a lofty name. [1] "And you?" Zhang Lie then asked the two children by Jun Jiuxiao's side.

The two of them both glanced at Jun Jiuxiao, then replied with youthful exuberance, "If we are admitted, then we too swear lifelong loyalty!"

"This isn't a game among children, but rather a decision that will guide your life. Are you certain?" Zhang Lie asked sternly as he looked once more toward Jun Jiuxiao.

Despite the tremendous pressure, Jun Jiuxiao stood stiffly and regarded Zhang Lie with a scorching gaze. He nodded. The other children did the same.

"Good, good. I look forward to your growth!" Zhang Lie retracted his aura again as he stepped away.

Under Sun Mengmeng's guidance, the youth present were assigned and sent to a series of communal dorms within the dojo. They were no different from the other disciples that had enrolled, except that they had coincidentally met Zhang Lie and passed his cursory inspection.

Once everything was settled, Sun Mengmeng came to his room. "Captain, I've brought you the list of new disciples!"

"What were the names of those other children beside him?" Zhang Lie asked. It was clear who 'him' referred to.

"The boy's Wu Wei, and the girl's Ye Xianchen," Sun Mengmeng replied immediately, having anticipated the question.

"These three children are somewhat interesting. Have them consume some white-grub cores and focus on nurturing their talents," Zhang Lie instructed as he stretched.

"Yes, Captain!"

After Sun Mengmeng left the room, Zhang Lie once again activated [Eclipse]. The room was replaced with the starry sky and a radiant moon. As the serpent devoured the moon, inch after inch, darkness seemed to descend, but just as the serpent was about to swallow the moon whole, Zhang Lie suddenly opened his eyes, panting loudly.

No, I can't combine the two techniques just yet. Whenever he tried, the sudden loss of control at the very end struck his body with severe backlash. It seemed as though he would have to hunt down the peak-grade moonlight wyrm before he could make any progress on this front.

The moonlight wyrm had been a legend in the first realm in his past life, one that he now knew was reality. This was the only peak-grade lifeform he knew of within the first realm; indeed, they shouldn't have been able to survive here at all. Although the wyrm was, at this point, significantly stronger than Zhang Lie, it was still restricted in its abilities by the fact that it was in the first realm. If he were able to concoct Potion #3 and hence to accrue superior-grade limit fragments, then he would have some chance of defeating it.

Having made up his mind, Zhang Lie began preparing to hunt the moonlit wyrm.

The next morning, as Zhang Lie walked out of his room, he saw hundreds of disciples practicing the basic [Dragonfist Punch], Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen, and Wu Wei among them. After they had washed up and replaced their shabby attire with dojo uniforms, they looked much more revitalized. Zhang Lie considered the disciples' practice for a moment before heading back to the dimensional world.

Within the dimensional world, over ten days had passed since the incident at the Runic Forest, but news of the matter was still circulating around the Blacksteel settlement, especially after Zhang Lie

was sighted. However, no one dared approach him; who would be daring enough to provoke a hunter willing to slaughter even hunters of the Long clan?

Zhang Lie wandered around the settlement, then vanished as he headed in the direction of the Desert of Silence, causing those hunters who had been spying on him to have done so to no avail.

Chapter 164: A Job Posting

After the events of the Runic Forest, Zhang Lie had become more careful about not telegraphing his plans. Furthermore, after having manipulated the major clans of the Blacksteel settlement at the Moonlit Pond, many hunters had gained a renewed interest in what lay within. Given his fame, if he were to appear at the Moonlit Pond in public, there would surely be scrutiny and speculation about what he was doing there.

As he walked into the forest, still under stealth, Zhang Lie activated his galewolf soulshard, then turned around and headed toward the Moonlit Pond. When he heard the sound of a waterfall and confirmed that he was heading in the right direction, he moved even more quickly. Past a patch of forest, he returned to the now-familiar falls of the Moonlit Pond.

Because of the waterfall, ripples constantly disrupted the surface of the pond, and the whoosh of the downpour could be heard easily from a distance. Droplets of water splashed onto Zhang Lie's body, triggering an idea in his mind.

"The Moonlit Pond," Zhang Lie murmured. He would have to consider the environmental factors at play carefully.

If not for this waterfall, the Moonlit Pond would be a body of still water. The water was so clear that Zhang Lie could see a few small fish swim by about a dozen meters under the surface, but there was what seemed to be an abyss by the center of the pond, from which bubbles would emerge from time to time. Standing above the pond and gazing downward, Zhang Lie felt as though he was looking down the gullet of a monstrous beast.

He was sure that the moonlight wyrm lived deep down the chasm.

Subsequently, he glanced all around him. The environment was saturated with water vapor and rather wet all around, so his water-attuned techniques would certainly be boosted in such an environment. However, so would the wyrm's attacks themselves.

Just as Zhang Lie was planning out the battle in his head, quite a few bubbles emerged from the surface of the pond. Sensing the disturbance, Zhang Lie hurriedly sped away with his galewolf soulshard. It wasn't yet time to be challenging the moonlit wyrm. If any hunters were nearby and noticed the commotion, he wouldn't stand to gain anything.

He glanced all around him, trying to memorize as much of the surroundings as he could, before leaving. After he did so, the suddenly frothing pond went calm again, but within the abyss leading below the lake, two eyes the size of lanterns suddenly opened...

Just as Zhang Lie was scouting out the Moonlit Pond, a commotion had erupted by the Blacksteel settlement. The Blacksteel settlement was crowded with hunters, who filled the streets and bars.

"What's going on? Aren't there any rooms left? I wanted to take a long, relaxing bath before participating in the Void Cup in two days' time!"

"Don't even think about it—everyone else made their reservations a week in advance!"

Countless hunters were shouting at each other as they tried to get one of the quickly vanishing spots in a nearby inn. Zhang Lie was preparing to return to the real world, but when he heard the commotion, he suddenly stilled. Were there really only two days left before the Void Cup?

"Long time no see, Zhang Lie," a familiar voice came from behind. Zhang Lie whirled around to find Chu Feng and Chu Xun heading in his direction.

"Indeed. The Void Cup's already about to begin!"

"Right? I'm feeling anxious even before it's started," Chu Feng continued, sucking in a deep breath.

"Hehe, brother, are you afraid you'll encounter Zhang Lie during the competition and get beaten black and blue?" Chu Xun whispered in his ear.

"Ahem! I'm your brother! Can't you leave me some face?" Chu Feng coughed awkwardly a few times, then glanced carefully in Zhang Lie's direction. Among the younger generation of hunters, who wasn't afraid of meeting Zhang Lie during the Void Cup?

"Right, Zhang Lie, you've registered, haven't you?" Chu Feng swiftly changed the topic.

"Registered?" Zhang Lie hesitated for a moment. He had simply been too busy: first with the affair at the Blackwind Fort, and then with the dojo's new disciples... no, he actually hadn't registered.

"Zhang Lie, you haven't forgotten, have you?" Chu Feng's face spasmed.

Given Zhang Lie's strength, even if he didn't participate in the Void Cup, it was clear that he would still be at the top of the ranking for the first-realm hunters of the dimensional world.

"Ah, I really did forget. Is there still time to register?" Zhang Lie asked calmly. Chu Feng's face spasmed again: anyone else would have been shocked to have forgotten, but Zhang Lie didn't even seem to treat the tournament as all that important.

"You're lucky, today's the last day to register." Chu Feng sucked in a deep breath. It seemed as though he was more invested in Zhang Lie's participation than Zhang Lie himself! "Come on, I'll show you where to register."

He beckoned Zhang Lie over as he squeezed through the crowd and walked toward the center of the Blacksteel settlement. Because only first-realm hunters were eligible to participate in the Void Cup, the registration was performed within the dimensional world, but the actual competition itself would be on Earth.

As they walked toward the hunters' guild, a rather lazy hunter was dozing off in the midday heat. After all, it was the last day of registration, and just about all those hunters who were intending to participate had already registered.

"Hello, may I ask—"

"If you'd like to register, please input the appropriate information on your microchip."

"Can I register for my teammates too?"

"As long as you're the captain, and as long as your team's registered with the settlement," the hunter replied without even raising his head.

Zhang Lie breathed out in relief as he mentally transmitted the information through the microchip device he held in his hand.

Team: Zenith

Leader: Zhang Lie

Members: Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, Sun Xiaowu, Li Feng, Yang Ze, Zhou Ying

When the device repeated the words verbally, the few people remaining in the guild hall stopped short and turned toward Zhang Lie, as did the hunter responsible for registering participants.

"Did I fill something in incorrectly?" Zhang Lie asked.

"Ah, no! My goodness, Zhang Lie registered for the Void Cup after all!"

"What are we going to do? Surely there's no way we'll be able to beat someone like him!"

"What if we're so unlucky that he's the first participant we meet?"

"Don't worry. After all, we're not hunters from Ning!"

Hunters around the area instantly began to gossip with each other.

Chu Feng sighed. Now that someone like Zhang Lie had registered, the eventual victor of the Void Cup seemed obvious.

"Dragonwolf, why are you only registering now? You should have told me that you were coming to register earlier." The hunter responsible for the registration process was now grinning broadly at him, seemingly far more energetic now that he was with a celebrity hunter. In his urge to please Zhang Lie, he even ignored someone like Chu Feng, himself the young master of a major clan.

The Void Cup was a competition for first-realm hunters sponsored by the world federation, and was a means by which each country and the world federation itself could select top talent to cultivate.

Hunters from all cities, countries, and planets would be eligible, and the competition itself would proceed over four stages: city-wide, country-wide, planet-wide, and realm-wide.

"Ah, why was I born in Ning?!"

"Without a doubt, the champion from Ning has been decided."

"Forget it, forget it! The top three hunters from each city can advance. Let's fight for second place!"

Many Ning hunters sighed upon finding out about the news, but by that time, Zhang Lie had long since returned to the real world. Compared to the Void Cup, he was far more concerned about the moonlight wyrm.

"Look at how much he's grown in such a short time! If only those elders had been willing to listen to me," Chu Feng sighed, glancing at his back.

"Come now, brother, you're a top hunter too, aren't you? You'd better work hard, or soon even his teammates will surpass you!"

"You brat, are you a member of the Chu clan or the Zhang clan?!" Chu Feng clicked his tongue at his little sister.

"A member of the Chu clan for now, but I'm sure I'll be part of the Zhang clan in the future!" she replied seriously, also gazing at Zhang Lie's back.

Once Zhang Lie returned to the Zenith Dojo, he informed everyone that he had registered them all for the Void Cup. Noticing that Sun Mengmeng was talking to a few strangers, he walked over.

"Ah, Captain!" Sun Mengmeng immediately noticed him and beckoned him over, and the conversation paused as everyone turned to him.

"Dojo Leader Zhang," the strangers greeted. They were in their thirties, wearing standard hunter's armor, and, from their genetic fluctuations, looked to be second-realm hunters.

Sun Mengmeng explained that these were all hunters from Ning, who, like Zhang Lie, didn't belong to any particular clan.

Chapter 165: Eve of the Cup

The reason the strangers had come to the Zenith Dojo was in search of a possible job. Coincidentally, the Zenith Dojo had just put up a post advertising openings for dojo instructors, and even though they were told that Zhang Lie wasn't at the dojo, they had chosen to wait there patiently for him.

"Dojo Leader Zhang, it's good to meet you. I'm Wang Li."

"I'm Xu Xiu."

"And I'm Ding Qiang."

The three of them respectfully introduced themselves. Though they were older than Zhang Lie, they looked toward him with awe and admiration; after all, Zhang Lie was at a stage they simply couldn't hope to compare to in terms of strength.

"Are all of you looking to be instructors at my Zenith Dojo?" Zhang Lie cut straight to the chase.

"Yes. If possible, Dojo Leader Zhang, we would also like to receive training from you in your spare time," Xu Xiu answered.

For the residents of the slums, Zhang Lie was a beacon of hope. He had managed so much starting from so little, and they wanted to learn how to do the same. If they could receive a few pointers from him, it would surely aid their development.

"I'm happy to dispense advice and to accept you all as instructors, but there's an ironclad rule of the Zenith Dojo that I intend for all disciples and instructors to follow. If you need to purge your framework and start over, would you still be willing to work here?"

"Of course!" one of the three men responded instantly, followed swiftly by the other two.

"In that case, the Zenith Dojo welcomes you all." Zhang Lie could see no reason not to provisionally accept them as instructors; of course, whether they would remain with the dojo would depend on their future performance.

Wang Li, Xu Xiu, and Ding Qiang sighed in relief. In truth, they had already purged their frameworks before arriving here, and if Zhang Lie were to refuse them, they wouldn't have known what to do. Fortunately, that worst-case scenario hadn't occurred.

Sun Mengmeng quickly arranged lodgings for these new dojo instructors, and they would soon be assimilated into dojo life.

At the moment, the hunters of Team Zenith really were quite overworked—the surge of popularity that stemmed from Zhang Lie's fame meant that they were overworked and understaffed, so the appearance of these dojo instructors was a godsend.

Once everything was settled, Zhang Lie assembled them all to have a discussion about the Void Cup, which would happen one day hence. The hunters of Team Zenith showed up with fatigue evident on their faces.

"Have you all forgotten about the Void Cup?" Zhang Lie suddenly asked, parroting what Chu Feng had asked him.

The hunters of Team Zenith instantly perked up.

"Ah, I've forgotten completely!" Yang Ze exclaimed.

"What do we do now, Captain?" Li Feng and Yang Ze were clutching at their heads.

"Don't worry. If the captain's bringing it up now, I'm sure he's already made proper arrangements for everything," Fang Yi commented calmly.

"Yes, I did. I was in the dimensional world today and learned that it was the last day for registration. We all barely made it in," Zhang Lie replied.

Indeed, the hunters of Team Zenith would have been sorely disappointed to miss the Void Cup, the goal they had been striving toward for months. Not only would the winners be able to increase their faction's reputation, they would even receive generous prizes from China and the world federation.

"Besides the Void Cup, I have one additional matter to bring up." Zhang Lie's expression turned serious, and the members of Team Zenith immediately paid him their full attention. "During the Void Cup, we'll need to make a few trips to the Moonlit Pond."

The Moonlit Pond! What could they be doing there? There was only one event of interest that they knew of: the appearance of the extremely strong lifeform living within it.

Chu Feng and the others had teamed up to defend against that lifeform, but it had still managed to kill the young master of the Li clan in a single blow. Had their captain really set their sights on it?

"If you aren't willing to participate, I won't force you," Zhang Lie continued.

"No, no! How could we be unwilling? We'll follow you everywhere, Captain!"

"Yes, Captain, your prey is our prey!"

"Good, I'm glad. I'll let you know when I've decided when we'll make our move. For now, focus on preparing for the Void Cup."

Everyone's eyes glinted. It was finally time to show the world what they had managed to make of themselves!

As Team Zenith prepared for the tournament, so did the factions opposed to Zhang Lie. In the Long clan manor at Lingnan, Long Xiao queried the gathered elders, "The Void Cup's about to begin, yes?"

"Yes, Head. The commencement ceremony is tomorrow," an elder quickly replied.

"Has Zhang Lie registered?" Long Xiao's expression was placid, his wrinkled face at ease.

"He barely made it in time, Head," the elder sighed, clearly understanding the implications of his participation.

Gathered at the meeting were the scions of the Long clan, and their faces soured upon hearing the news.

"Excellent! Since he's daring enough to participate, then we'd better make sure he gets a good showing." Long Xiao's aged face suddenly distorted, and frost and rime quickly crept up the walls of the conference room. Subject to an unusual pressure, the gathered elders and scions didn't dare breathe.

"Prepare for the Void Cup. I'll handle matters involving Zhang Lie." The next moment, Long Xiao's face returned to placidity, but the temperature of the conference room remained unnaturally cold. Following Long Xiao's command, the Long elders and scions rushed out of the room, leaving a figure who slowly walked out of the shadows.

"Figure out Zhang Lie's whereabouts in the short term. I want you to kill him with a single blow!" Long Xiao commanded, with piercing killing intent in his eyes.

"Yes, Head!" the figure responded politely, then returned to the shroud of darkness. Only then did Long Xiao smile in satisfaction.

Two figures were slowly making their way to the Wang clan in Ning, uneasily staring all around them, as if they were afraid of being spotted.

"Yang, are you really going to trade this footage away?" Liu whispered to him.

Yang was clutching a microchip in his hand containing the footage of Zhang Lie's trial at the Ning branch of the dojo consortium. He had kept it safe and sound ever since the trial, but now that he was in need of money, he decided to sell it off. Over secret channels, he released news that he had detailed footage of Zhang Lie fighting against an opponent, and he was quickly contacted by members of the Wang clan.

"You know how much they're willing to pay us, don't you? Do you really want this footage to go unreleased?" Yang rolled his eyes at Liu. The price that the Wang clan had offered him was far too high to be refused; if the transaction were completed successfully, neither of them would have to worry about working for the rest of their lives.

Naturally, the two reporters were very tempted by this offer. In the end, Liu, like Yang, couldn't resist the temptation. The two of them were brought within the Wang manor by Wang guards into a rather dim cottage, one from which they never walked out again.

Wang Han stepped out of the door, his hands dripping with fresh blood, a microchip in his hands. His face lit up with a confident gleam. "Hand this to the assassination team. No matter what, we'll have to succeed this time around!"

The guard peered into the room and swallowed a gulp of saliva. "I understand, Head. I'll have it delivered immediately."

"Have someone clean this cottage up. Feed whatever remains inside to the dogs!" Wang Han instructed his other guard as he wiped away the blood on his hands.

That guard nodded and dashed off as well.

Zhang Lie didn't know, or care to know, what the Wang and Long clans were plotting. After all, he was steadily growing to the point where he simply wouldn't have to worry about the clans at all. No matter how they tried to plot his demise, the only demise they would obtain would be their own.

He was currently dividing his attention between the dojo's affairs, Team Zenith, and special sessions at the Blackwind Fort. The past two days had been nightmarish for the hunters of Team Zenith: Zhang Lie wanted them to place in the top ten of the Void Cup, and they had no choice but to subject themselves to hellish training as a result.

The next morning, at sunrise, the central plaza of Ning was crowded with people, hunters and regular citizens alike. The festivities heralded the start of the Void Cup, the citywide tournament...

Chapter 166: The Citywide Stage Begins

As the citywide stage of the Void Cup began, the hunters returned to the real world, and the dimensional world grew silent once more. Rays of shining green light shot out of the fountain in the central plaza of Ning, heralding the arrival of hundreds of airships. The gathered hunters made way for the new arrivals.

"Is the military handling the Void Cup again?"

"Who else do you think could handle this crowd?"

The hunters chatted away as they watched the airships land.

Military personnel from the world federation and Chinese government stepped out of the airships. The first one down was a sparkling, white-robed elder, his body seemingly glowing from within and releasing holy light. His demeanor was calm and placid, and his beard white and wispy with age. He seemed like a sage from a bygone era.

"Is this the world federation's Elder Bai?"

"Yes, apparently, he's the host for the first elimination round to be held in Ning!"

The gathered hunters continued to whisper to each other. Elder Bai was known as the top hunter in Ning, but he was apparently rather reticent.

"Elder Bai, you're here quite early!" Su Feng walked out from a nearby airship, his aura no less intimidating than Elder Bai's.

"You too, Commander Su," Elder Bai replied. From their interaction, it was quite clear that they were old acquaintances.

"The Wang clan has arrived!"

"The Heaven's Flame Dojo has arrived!"

The Wang clan and the Heaven's Flame Dojo's airships arrived in quick succession. In order to guarantee the fairness of the Void Cup, the military would call for local factions to help co-chair the event, each cooperating and supervising the other party, in order to prevent any collusion, bribery, or discrimination during the competition itself.

Wang Han strode down his airship, his face cold. After greeting Elder Bai and Commander Su, he stood still, a grimace on his face. The leader of the Heaven's Flame Dojo did much the same. As two of the top factions in Ning, they were naturally hoping for their disciples to give a good showing during the Void Cup, but their dreams were not to be.

A particularly eye-catching member of the younger generation had dominated over them all; indeed, none of the other hunters could compare to the brilliance he gave off.

"Since everyone's gathered here already, shall we commence with the trial?" Elder Bai asked, looking around him.

"Of course," Wang Han replied.

Elder Bai nodded. After Elder Bai and Su Feng each gave a speech, the citywide tournament began in earnest; the hunters remained silent as they watched the proceedings.

"Captain, it looks like our debut will be near the end of the tournament, and there's no need for us to be rushing there now," Sun Xiaowu grumbled. Would that he could be the first on stage, the first to show off his newfound strength! He was deflated just thinking of how late he would be presenting.

"No need? Of course we need to be there early! It's a valuable opportunity to observe how our competitors fight—one of the only chances we have to obtain firsthand information!" Sun Mengmeng corrected him.

"What? You mean it's better to go near the end?"

"Of course! You don't want to go first," Sun Mengmeng emphasized.

"That's true. No one would want to reveal their trump cards early, so those hunters fighting at the beginning could easily be blindsided. Of course, the worst-case scenario is if they have to fight against stronger hunters. In that case, they'd either lose or reveal too much of their abilities beforehand." Fang Yi took over the analysis.

"There's this much that we should be considering?" Sun Xiaowu gasped in surprise, as did Li Feng and Yang Ze.

Zhang Lie mentally shook his head. The members of Team Zenith might have gotten some combat experience, but they still hadn't matured completely as hunters. It seemed as though he would have to train them more regarding such competitions.

"In that case, who's up during the first round of matches?" Sun Xiaowu asked.

Sun Mengmeng quickly pulled up the roster and began analyzing it. She suddenly exclaimed, "Ah, the captain's going up in the first batch!"

This time, even Zhang Lie was caught unaware. He was part of the first group of competitors? In truth, he hadn't paid close attention to the roster. Once he heard Sun Mengmeng's exclamation, he immediately pulled up a copy of his own.

The first round of the citywide tournament was a simple one-on-one elimination stage, with the victors progressing to the next round. To ensure that hunters didn't get eliminated early on due to bad luck, there were still a few losers' brackets available for those who lost in the first round. The tournament structure was designed to favor strength far more than luck.

There were two thousand hunters participating in each batch of fights, and Zhang Lie was in the first batch.

I almost missed registration, and now I'm almost going to miss the first match, too? Zhang Lie wondered at his luck.

Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi found it quite curious that Zhang Lie would be slated to participate at the very beginning; after all, given his reputation, they were sure that his fight would be moved nearer the end.

With a big boom, a set of fireworks shot into the air, and a beam of green light pierced the heavens.

"The Void Cup's begun!" Sun Mengmeng cried out.

"We have to hurry, or the captain will miss his fight!" Fang Yi urged, as the hunters ran toward the plaza.

The matches would take place on an aerial stage that hovered in place above the plaza. The stage gradually segmented into a thousand pieces, one for each pair of competitors. Above them all were Su Feng and the others, there to oversee the competition.

"The Void Cup will now begin!" Elder Bai announced. The stage shone brightly, filling the entire city with light.

Su Feng and Wang Han both glanced around, and Wang Han bit down on his lips. Zhang Lie was to be among the first batch of competitors.

"The first round of the citywide stage will be by elimination. There are a thousand arenas in all, numbered from #1 to #1000! The winner of each match will remain to face winners of other matches; the losers will subsequently enter a losers' bracket to face off against other losers," Elder Bai continued.

"Just as in past years, we'll still have a chance to advance even if we lose the first round!"

"That said, with Zhang Lie around, don't dream of taking first place."

"Who knows? What if he chooses not to participate in the tournament?"

The hunters began whispering to each other.

"Let's begin, Elder Bai. I'm sure all the competitors gathered here are quite familiar with the Void Cup by now," Su Feng murmured.

Elder Bai shook his head. It was true that the rules hadn't changed for quite some time, but he was still obligated to read them out at the very beginning.

"First batch of competitors, ready up!" he shouted.

Piercing green light shot into the skies amidst a wave of genetic energy. When the intensity of the light reached a crescendo, a green beam shot out of each of the thousand stage fragments.

Behind Elder Bai, a holographic screen rose up, announcing the competitors that would be participating on each stage fragment. Among the first batch, one specific name stood out: the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!

His opponent seemed to be a hunter from a relatively small clan, Li Sanqing.

Several competitors sighed in relief.

"What an unlucky hunter, to be facing off against Zhang Lie in his first match!"

"Ha, looks like I'll be able to ascend to the second match safely, then."

"I wonder how the Wang clan feels about all this? They've dominated the citywide stage of the tournament in the past, but now..."

Li Sanqing gritted his teeth and sighed. It looked as though he would have no choice but to focus on doing well during the elimination stage.

"Competitors, ascend to the stage!" Elder Bai raised his arm.

The green glow emanating from each stage fragment would cut off once the named competitors had made it onto each fragment. Most fragments were no longer shining with light; notably, however, the first one still was.

On the first stage fragment, Li Sanqing's forehead beaded with sweat as he urgently awaited the arrival of his competitor.

"Where's Zhang Lie?" some of the competitors in the subsequent batches murmured to each other.

Zhang Lie was slated to fight on the first stage fragment.

As Li Sanqing glanced around nervously, he suddenly froze. If Zhang Lie had been present at the scene, the burgeoning burst of green light would have teleported him up to his associated stage fragment.

However, the fact that Zhang Lie still hadn't appeared meant that he was either not at the scene or had chosen to back out of the competition. The latter was unlikely, so there was only one possibility: had Zhang Lie forgotten about the tournament?

Li Sanqing gaped in disbelief. If that were the case, he would win this match without doing a thing!

Chapter 167: Winning Without a Fight

"Che, Li Sanqing's got it lucky this time around!" several hunters groused, wondering just where Zhang Lie was.

"If Zhang Lie doesn't show up, according to the rules, he'll be disqualified from the Void Cup," Elder Bai murmured, as if reminding Su Feng of something.

Su Feng felt an impending headache; Zhang Lie had informed him that he would be attending—had he really forgotten? This was an opportunity that most first-realm hunters could only dream of, so was he really going to forfeit it?

"One minute remains before the start of the first match. All competitors who don't make it in time will be disqualified!" Elder Bai announced, and a timer appeared on the screen to his back. Most of the competitors had already ascended to their respective stage fragments, and the match was already underway on those fragments that already had both designated competitors on them.

"Hurry, hurry!" Lin Sanqing murmured, glancing at the timer, praying that it would count down even more quickly.

In that case, he would be able to win his match without doing anything.

"There are only thirty seconds left. I don't suppose that lad will show up at this point," Su Feng sighed. It was true that Zhang Lie had no need to prove his strength at the Void Cup, but the rewards for the top participants were certainly lavish enough to be worthwhile. Didn't he care about them? What a headache-inducing fellow!

"Has Zhang Lie not arrived?" Elder Bai asked. The competitors below breathed a sigh of relief: it looked as though he really wasn't coming.

"I'm here, I'm here!" Just then, as the timer displayed fifteen seconds remaining, seven figures rushed into the plaza, the seven members of Team Zenith. The competitors, who had just sighed in relief, sucked in a breath again. Why did Zhang Lie have to arrive at the very last moment?!

Lin Sanqing, who heard the commotion even from the stage fragment above the crowd, barely avoided fainting. He thought himself unlucky to be matched with Zhang Lie, then lucky again to almost win the first match without any effort, and now...

"Hurry up! What are you thinking, being late to such an important occasion!" Su Feng snapped, then glanced pityingly at Li Sanqing.

Zhang Lie darted toward the beam of light, which teleported him to his stage fragment. By then, Li Sanqing's knees were trembling, and he had lost all motivation to fight. His opponent was the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, the hunter who had defeated thousands of hunters from the Li and Long clans in one fell swoop, who had manipulated the five major clans of the Blacksteel settlement!

As Zhang Lie walked toward the stage, he began to stretch. As he warmed up, he released a suffocating aura, one so dense that Li Sanqing was finding it difficult to breathe. "It's been a while since I last exercised," he murmured to himself, but Li Sanqing seemed to interpret his casual words completely differently.

From his perspective, it seemed likely that Zhang Lie might play around with him, like a cat with a mouse, and the more he thought about it, the more gruesome the images in his mind seemed to get.

"Hello, I'm Zhang Lie," Zhang Lie greeted his competitor warmly. After all, this was meant to be a friendly match, and he had no conflict with Li Sanqing. Furthermore, Li Sanqing was about as strong as a kid to him, so he didn't think he would have to take this match very seriously.

When they saw him smile, however, the competitors avidly watching his match from down below all had a strange expression on their face. There was one memorable occasion on which they could remember him smiling in this fashion: right before the opening of the Zenith Dojo, a prelude to the bloodshed that had followed almost immediately after.

"I surrender!" Li Sanqing howled out, his heart palpitating.

The hunters below gaped in shock.

"Damn it, he's giving up just like that? It's only the first match!"

"Well, of course he would—his opponent's the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie! It's a logical decision, isn't it? If I were matched up against him, I'd surrender without even getting on stage!"

"He's rather unlucky, isn't he?"

The crowd didn't seem surprised by the outcome of this match.

"Li Sanqing, are you certain? If you lose this match, you'll have to enter the losers' bracket!" Elder Bai wasn't surprised at his decision, either. After all, it was a strategic choice for hunters to concede if they didn't think they could defeat their opponent; it would allow them to conserve their energy and keep their true strength hidden.

"Yes, Elder Bai!" Li Sanqing replied. Who would be willing to fight against a hunter like Zhang Lie?

None of the Wang, Qin, or Long clans had managed to take down Zhang Lie, so how could Li Sanqing dream of doing what they couldn't? Zhang Lie was a calm, decisive hunter who had so many tricks up his sleeves that Li Sanqing was shuddering just thinking about them.

"You surrender?" Zhang Lie was somewhat flabbergasted: the Void Cup was a precious opportunity for every hunter in the first realm, and he certainly wasn't going to do anything to his competitor, so...

"Farewell!" Li Sanqing hurriedly fled off the stage.

The winner on the first stage fragment was none other than Zhang Lie!

Li Sanqing's timely surrender caused Zhang Lie's name to appear in green on the screen behind Elder Bai. Because everyone else was still in the middle of their matches, despite the fact that Zhang Lie was the last competitor to start his match, he was the first to finish, and he again became the center of attention.

"Captain, you're amazing! Your opponent was so scared of you that he surrendered before even facing you!" Sun Xiaowu shouted as Zhang Lie walked back to the other members of Team Zenith, his eyes gleaming.

The others all nodded.

"Don't worry about me. All of you should be studying your competitors!" Zhang Lie advised them.

Sun Mengmeng and the others glanced at their rosters and began pulling up information on the opponents they were about to face.

On the other hand, because Zhang Lie had been in the first batch of hunters and had won his first match, he wouldn't have to worry about another match until the afternoon.

"The second batch, on stage fragment #451, Sun Mengmeng VS Yang Piaopiao!" Sun Mengmeng took a deep breath as she stepped toward the green beam of light.

"Good luck, Sis!"

"Good luck, Mengmeng!"

Team Zenith cheered for her as she departed.

"Captain, do you think Sun Mengmeng will be able to make it?" Everyone turned to Zhang Lie.

Sun Mengmeng was a skilled hunter, and she had both experienced a foundational breakthrough and consumed Potion #1. In theory, her stats would be even stronger than Chu Feng or Yun Bing's.

Furthermore, with Zhang Lie's help in selecting appropriate soulshards and techniques, defeating her opponent, Yang Piaopiao, should have been a piece of cake for her. However, Yang Piaopiao was from the Sound's Maestro Dojo, which was known for its unusual aural attacks that tended to catch opponents unawares.

Although Sun Mengmeng had some combat experience, she had hardly trained against anyone well-versed in such attacks.

"Sound waves take some time to travel, so if Sun Mengmeng were to launch an attack immediately, she can surely defeat her opponent, but if she were to hesitate and allow her opponent to saturate the field in sound, winning would be far more challenging," Zhang Lie analyzed. Either way, however, he was confident in Sun Mengmeng's abilities.

Sun Mengmeng stepped on stage almost at the same moment her opponent did, a brunette with long, wavy hair and a guzheng in her lap.

As a member of Team Zenith, Sun Mengmeng naturally drew attention to herself.

"Sun Mengmeng, may I ask if you're a member of Team Zenith?" Yang Piaopiao greeted her politely, as though she were a fan meeting an idol.

"Yes!" Sun Mengmeng smiled, even as she began to circulate her genetic energy.

"Miss Sun, would you give me a chance to show off my talents? I wouldn't want to lose too badly in front of you! What if I composed a song for you?" Yang Piaopiao stretched lazily, revealing her flawless body, as she sought to capture Sun Mengmeng's attention.

"I'm sorry, but this is a battle arena, not a performance stage. Take this!" Sun Mengmeng, almost wholly unaffected by her gestures, loosed an arrow almost as she spoke, an arrow materializing in her right palm and her firebird bow in her left.

A phoenix's screech shook the stage fragment as it shot toward Yang Piaopiao.

"Ah!!!" Yang Piaopiao clearly didn't expect that her opponent would attack so suddenly and decisively. She let out an enraged shout as genetic energy exploded out of her and she began to counterattack. The crisp, clear notes of a guzheng sounded from her instrument, each note causing her concentration to break for a moment. "[Beasts' Lament]!"

"Look! They've begun fighting!" Sun Xiaowu shouted from below. Everyone in Team Zenith focused on the stage fragment on which Sun Mengmeng was located.

The phoenix's screech and the howling of a menagerie of beasts shook the arena as fire- and wind-attuned genetic energy clashed with each other. Yang Piaopiao stumbled back, the song she was

playing on her guzheng having been forcibly terminated. In terms of quality and quantity of genetic energy, Yang Piaopiao was naturally no match for Sun Mengmeng.

Sun Mengmeng clenched her teeth and bore with the pain in her head long enough to shoot three arrows toward Yang Piaopiao. Her gaze cold, Yang Piaopiao vanished from sight like a specter, but before she could do so completely, Sun Mengmeng dashed forward like a lioness.

As two waves of genetic energy dissipated into the air, Sun Mengmeng, holding onto Yang Piaopiao's neck with one hand, appeared in front of everyone's sight.

"The winner of stage fragment #451—Sun Mengmeng!"

Chapter 168: Sun Li, Crushed

"How could this be?" Yang Piaopiao could barely believe her eyes. She had just activated a superior-grade stealth-type soulshard, and her opponent should have been unable to pinpoint her location.

However, Sun Mengmeng had somehow dashed forward and taken her down before she could vanish completely! Wasn't this woman supposed to be a long-ranged attacker? Why did she have such superlative close-range abilities as well?

Against her, Yang Piaopiao hadn't even survived three blows! Just what sort of monsters were hiding in Team Zenith?!

"Your soulshard's ability isn't bad, but it takes too long to activate. Furthermore, you're not the only one with a soulshard," Sun Mengmeng pointed out, noticing how perplexed her opponent seemed to be. "As long as you're still alive, as long as your body's giving off heat, I'll be able to find you in an instant."

The spectators below couldn't help but stare at Sun Mengmeng. They realized then that Zhang Lie wasn't the only strong hunter in Team Zenith, and that Sun Mengmeng was also an opponent to be wary of.

After the end of the match, she and Yang Piaopiao bowed to each other before returning to the stands.

"Sis, you're way too strong!"

"Right, you managed to grab that woman after just two or three blows!"

Sun Xiaowu, Yang Ze, and the others swarmed her after the fight, asking about her experience.

Sun Mengmeng shook her head; she wasn't completely pleased with her own performance, and there were quite a few errors that she had realized after reviewing the fight in her head.

For quite a while afterwards, no hunter from Team Zenith was called to the stage. Instead, quite a few hunters from the major clans stepped forward, and many of them advanced successfully to the next round.

In the blink of an eye, as morning turned to noon, the seventh batch of competitors was finally called to the stage, Fang Yi from Team Zenith among them.

"On stage fragment #9, Fang Yi VS Sun Li!"

The appearance of Fang Yi and Sun Li, from the Heaven's Flame Dojo, on screen caused a commotion to erupt from the stands down below.

"It's your turn, Fang Yi!" Zhang Lie announced, clapping him on the shoulder. His relaxed tone left Fang Yi surprisingly at ease.

In truth, Sun Li was likely the hardest opponent that any member of Team Zenith would face this round. He was the first-ranked hunter in the Tianzhou settlement, as well as a core disciple of the Heaven's Flame Dojo, with strength comparable to one of the young clan heads from the major clans of the capital.

The Heaven's Flame dojo leader frowned at the matchup, but ultimately sighed in relief.

Sun Li was one of the strongest disciples he had trained in recent years, and he was expecting a good showing from him during the Void Cup—though necessarily one that would be diminished by the unexpected presence of Zhang Lie.

"Go, Sun Li! Let those hunters of Ning realize that the Zenith Dojo isn't the only dojo around!" the Heaven's Flame dojo leader commanded, a hint of indignance in his tone.

The opening of the Zenith Dojo had marked disaster for the other dojos in Ning, but those dojo leaders didn't dare do anything to Zhang Lie, the hunter who had discovered the existence of limit fragments. He was backed by the Chinese military itself, and they feared the retribution they would receive if they dared do anything to him.

However, the Void Cup would be an excellent opportunity to diminish the Zenith Dojo's reputation. If Sun Li could defeat Fang Yi, it would show that the Zenith Dojo was inferior to the Heaven's Flame Dojo.

Nevertheless, recalling Sun Mengmeng's performance from earlier, the Heaven's Flame dojo leader hastily added to Sun Li, "Don't look down on your opponent too much. Ensure victory at all cost!"

Sun Li inhaled deeply. He recalled Yang Piaopiao's fight; he would give this match his all. "Don't worry, Dojo Leader. I'll make sure everyone's talking about the Heaven's Flame dojo!"

Sun Li stepped into the beam of light and appeared on stage fragment #9.

On another part of the stands, Zhang Lie casually told Fang Yi, "Go on, Fang Yi! That hunter's no match for you."

He didn't lower his voice, and the hunters gathered nearby all looked toward him curiously. It was clear just how confident Zhang Lie was in Fang Yi's strength.

Fang Yi nodded, his confidence significantly boosted by Zhang Lie's words, as he stepped toward the beam of light and was teleported to stage fragment #9.

The two competitors glanced at each other, and the atmosphere became suddenly tense.

The Heaven's Flame dojo leader clenched a fist. Based on Sun Mengmeng's performance just now, he knew that the members of Team Zenith would be a force to be reckoned with. Despite Sun Li's talent, he was still a little worried.

On the other hand, neither Zhang Lie nor the rest of his team seemed at all worried about the outcome of the fight. Fang Yi had always taken on the role of an attacker during Team Zenith's coordinated fights. In terms of pure strength, he was comparable to Sun Mengmeng and superior to the other members.

Fang Yi, his obsidian spear in his palm, bowed to his opponent as he analyzed him.

Even before they had exchanged any blows, Sun Li's heart was already starting to quail.

Fang Yi, who stood immobile, seemed like a bolt of lightning hiding amidst the dark clouds of a thunderstorm. The moment he moved, he would strike fast, true, and hard, and it felt as though nothing Sun Li did would deter him.

What sort of pressure was this? He was Sun Li, favored disciple of the Heaven's Flame Dojo! How could he be feeling such intense pressure from a hunter from the same generation? No, he had to be mistaken!

"Sun Li, from the Heaven's Flame Dojo!" Sun Li forced himself to remain calm as he introduced himself and stared alertly at Fang Yi.

He was so overwhelmed by Fang Yi's aura that he didn't dare make the first move. Sensing his opponent's hesitation, Fang Yi stepped forward. His eyes glowed golden, snakes of lightning crackled over his skin, and a gale of wind suddenly seized the arena. "Take this! [Rondo of Wind and Storm]!"

"A dual wind and lightning attunement?" Sun Li cried out in shock. His skin turned a flaming red as he darted toward the edge of the arena, moving so quickly he left afterimages in his wake.

Fang Yi strode forward, wrapped up in a maelstrom of wind and thunder, thrusting forward with his spear. The wind howled; lightning crackled; the green glow of light forming the stage shook and fizzled.

The entire stage fragment was overwhelmed by the storm, and Sun Li felt like a leaf caught in its midst. He had no choice but to flee, but though he was fast, Fang Yi's spear was faster. Sun Li's body crashed to the ground. The moment right before his attack landed, Fang Yi's eyes widened, and he forcibly tried to blunt his attack, but Sun Li still spat out a mouthful of blood in midair.

The moment he landed, with Fang Yi's spear pointing at his throat, Sun Li cried out, "I surrender!"

Fang Yi stowed his spear. "Thank you for the fight."

Everything seemed to happen in a blink of an eye; by the time the spectating hunters watching the fight realized what was going on, the fight was already over!

"What?! What did I just see? Sun Li was defeated in an instant, just like that!"

"I saw it too—we aren't dreaming, are we?"

"Is every member of Team Zenith like that? If even Sun Li fell so quickly, is there any chance left for us?"

The outcome of the fight caused a huge commotion. The spectators had expected a long, drawn-out fight between the two parties, and most of them even favored Sun Li. Who would have expected that Fang Yi would defeat Sun Li in a single, devastating blow?

The Heaven's Flame dojo leader's face turned dark: Sun Li was a core disciple of the dojo, and his loss was the dojo's loss. Furthermore, Sun Li hadn't lost to Zhang Lie, but rather to one of his teammates! The dojo leader felt as though he had been slapped in the face with uncommon force.

Overseeing the fights, Wang Han grimaced. Zhang Lie was bad enough, but would he have to worry about Team Zenith as well? Just what sort of team was this? None of the hunters in it were famous, but all of them seemed unusually strong. How had Zhang Lie managed to assemble such a team? The stronger Zhang Lie and his team was, the more dire the situation would be for the younger generation of the Wang clan!

"The winner of stage fragment #9—Fang Yi!"

Sun Li's face was pale white, and he was still panting somewhat from exertion. He had felt death looking him in the eye during Fang Yi's attack; if Fang Yi hadn't reduced the strength of his blow in time, Sun Li would likely have died.

Sun Li knew that he had lost, well and truly. In control over the battlefield, in the accumulation of genetic energy, in the masterful use of his techniques—Fang Yi was superior to Sun Li in all these areas. Against Fang Yi's devastating blow, he didn't even have a chance to show off his strength.

He struggled to stand up. "Thank you for your mercy."

Glancing at the stage, the dojo leader of the Heaven's Flame Dojo spat out, "Trash, useless piece of trash!" As an experienced hunter in his own right, he could sense that Fang Yi's attack was more bluster than anything else, but that alone was sufficient for Sun Li's mental defenses to crumble. If Sun Li had attacked, he might still have lost, but the fight certainly wouldn't have been so one-sided.

His aura once again restrained, Fang Yi returned to his unassuming, reserved self, but none of the hunters who had watched the fight could forget how he had looked in battle.

Sun Li bowed, then returned to the stands without a word.

The seventh batch of competitors was the last batch to be called up that morning. After Fang Yi returned to the stands, Elder Bai announced a break. The tournament would resume at 2 PM.

The hunters gathered at the stands slowly left the plaza, some heading to a hotel or their residence to rest, and others searching for a secluded location to prepare themselves for the fights that lay ahead.

Chapter 169: VS Wang Xuan

Zhang Lie and the others also found a bar in which to rest. The bar was playing soothing ambient music, which they found surprisingly relaxing. At present, Zhang Lie, Sun Mengmeng, and Fang Yi had all advanced to the next round, with Sun Xiaowu, Li Feng, Zhou Ying, and Yang Ze still awaiting their first fight.

Zhang Lie wasn't very worried about Sun Xiaowu, Li Feng, and Zhou Ying, who had all moved to Ning and were in the same citywide stage as him. He believed that they would all easily make it to

the nationwide stage. The hunter he was most concerned about was Yang Ze, who was on Mars. He wasn't a particularly valued member of his clan, and Zhang Lie was worried that he would be bullied and tricked out of his rightful victory because of it.

Fortunately, Yang Ze called them almost right after they had sat down to inform them that nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and that he would be participating in the tournament as usual in the afternoon.

After hanging up, Zhang Lie turned to the three hunters who had yet to fight. "Well? Have you all found some information about your opponents?"

"My opponent's some unknown figure who hasn't even maxed out his superior gene fragments. I'm sure I'll win easily!" Sun Xiaowu announced.

On the other hand, Li Feng and Zhou Ying both seemed rather anxious.

"My opponent's Wang Xuan, the young master of the Wang clan from Ning. I'm afraid I have a tough match ahead of me," Li Feng murmured diffidently.

After all, before he met Zhang Lie, he was nothing more than a regular hunter. Under no circumstances would he ever end up competing against a young master of a major clan.

"Li Feng, what're you afraid of? Let me tell you this: in brute strength alone, you surely outclass your opponent. So, listen up—don't back down now. Make sure that you win your match cleanly and quickly. This is an order! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Captain!" Li Feng was essentially suffering from a mild case of stage fright, and Zhang Lie's command would give him something to focus his attention before and during the match.

As long as he could exhibit his normal strength, Li Feng would surely win the fight against Wang Xuan. After all, Li Feng's framework was mythic-grade, and he dominated over his opponent in terms of raw gene fragments as well.

Zhang Lie then turned to Zhou Ying, who hung her head. Her opponent, Situ Hong, was likewise a strong fellow, a favored disciple from the Scorched Flame Dojo, one of the top three dojos in Ning. Most importantly, her opponent's framework was fire-attuned, and the elemental disadvantage was quite concerning to her.

With Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi already having won their matches, and Yang Ze and Sun Xiaowu confident in winning theirs, she felt more and more pressure to succeed, lest she drag the rest of the team down. As a result, she was even more reticent than usual.

"Zhou Ying, you aren't worse than any of the hunters present here. Don't forget how much you've been training lately! Do your best. Regardless of whether you win or lose, we'll all support you. I've watched you fight, and I'm confident that you'll be able to surmount this obstacle and obtain a rightful victory."

For Zhou Ying, it was far more important that Zhang Lie relieve her stress than to add to it.

Zhou Ying's eyes brightened. Her captain was right—she knew just how much she had struggled, how much additional work she had put in, to keep up with everyone else. That work amounted to something, didn't it?

Everyone else was taking great strides forward—she could do the same!

"I'm confident that we'll all make it to the top ten of the citywide stage, at the very least. There's no doubt about it!"

Zhang Lie's proclamation stoked everyone's fighting spirit.

At 2 PM, the plaza was once again filled with the competitors for the Void Cup.

"Clan Head Wang, if I remember correctly, your trump card's fighting in the eighth batch, isn't he?" the Heaven's Flame dojo leader asked, from where they were seated in the VIP stands.

However, Wang Han's face turned dark. Every clan head would train worthy successors in the next generation, including the Wang clan. The Void Cup was an important affair for securing clan prestige, one that Wang Han wasn't going to give up on, but the circumstances didn't seem to be in his favor.

"What's the matter, Clan Head Wang? Aren't you interested in having a scion of yours win the citywide stage of the tournament?" the Heaven's Flame dojo leader continued prodding at him.

The winner? Was this meant to be a veiled insult? With a bastard like Zhang Lie around, how could Wang Xuan hope to become the victor of the citywide stage? At most, he would get second place.

Veins throbbed on Wang Han's forehead. Just as he was about to respond with an insult of his own, Su Feng slowly walked over, and the rather barbed conversation between Wang Han and the Heaven's Flame dojo leader naturally drew to a close.

"The eighth batch of competitors shall ascend to the stage!" Elder Bai shouted from above the plaza. An illuminated holographic screen once again appeared behind him, and the thousand stage fragments hovered in the air.

"On stage fragment #35, Li Feng VS Wang Xuan!"

Wang Han jolted when he saw Wang Xuan's opponent.

Li Feng?! Li Feng wasn't a hunter from Ning, and neither Wang Xuan nor Wang Han knew anything about him. Li Feng had only moved to Ning recently after deciding to become one of Zhang Lie's followers, as had Sun Mengmeng, Zhou Ying, Sun Xiaowu, and Fang Yi.

"Wang Xuan? Who's he?"

"You don't know Wang Xuan? He's at the top of the gene leaderboard in the Blackgold settlement!"

"He's the young head of the Wang clan—almost no one has ever seen him fight, and he's a mysterious figure even to hunters from his settlement!"

"In that case, why is he ranked #1?"

"Well, because that's what the will of the dimensional world evaluated him as, of course!"

"In that case, he's pretty much guaranteed to win?"

"Guaranteed to win? No, no, of course not! Don't you know just who he's facing? Li Feng, from Team Zenith!"

You know, the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie's own team!"

"What?! In that case, we'd better watch that fight!"

A young man in blood-red armor strode out from the ranks of the Wang delegation, his features so perfect he could have passed for a doll.

"Stage fragment #35," Wang Xuan murmured to himself, then headed to the corresponding beam of green light.

Li Feng swallowed. The nerves that he had been suppressing threatened to rise up; after all, Wang Xuan was, just like Chu Feng and Yun Bing, a young clan head of a major clan. Nevertheless, Li Feng took a deep breath, fixed his gaze ahead of him, and stepped boldly into the beam of light.

Two figures appeared on stage fragment #35.

Li Feng took another deep breath, still feeling somewhat unsettled deep inside him.

"What a pity. I wanted to fight against Zhang Lie!" Wang Xuan began, glancing at Li Feng disdainfully, as though he were no more than an ant.

"You? Just who do you think you are?" Li Feng slowly clenched his fist, a look of fury darting across his face.

"I suppose I'll just have to settle the Wang clan's blood feud with you first!" Wang Xuan snarled. He stepped forward without the usual pleasantries. Genetic energy exploded from him as he leapt forward, a punch heading straight for Li Feng's face.

"Despicable!" Li Feng shouted. Light flashing by his feet, he too made his move. Allegedly, once mastered, his footwork technique [Daybreak] could allow him to move at a speed close to that of light itself. He darted away in a flash of white light, causing Wang Xuan's sneak attack to miss.

"Ah, he's improved quite a fair bit since the last time we sparred!" Even Zhang Lie was surprised by the extent of Li Feng's mobility. He was so quick that Wang Xuan simply couldn't react in time to his actions.

"Of course! He's been training day in and out for this competition!" Sun Xiaowu pumped his fist into the air.

Wang Xuan grimaced, unable to bear the humiliation of being unable to catch his opponent. He realized that it would be useless to try to chase after Li Feng, so he stopped moving and touched his palms to the floor of the stage instead. "[The Earth Beckons: Terrestrial Wave]!"

With a dull thump, a mud-yellow glow radiated from the stage, and ripple after ripple of genetic energy spread across it.

Li Feng, who was racing away, suddenly felt a force tug on his feet, causing him to stumble. He turned around to see Wang Xuan narrowing his eyes at him: he was clearly the culprit behind this unnatural attack.

"Is running all you can do?" An arrogant expression back on his face now that he had managed to subdue Li Feng with a single blow, Wang Xuan materialized a two-handed giant axe. "[The Earth Beckons: Tremorquake]!"

The ground began to shudder, and Wang Xuan bellowed and stomped forward after having transformed into a red bull.

"Ah, what's Li Feng going to do now! He's trapped, and Wang Xuan's heading straight for him!"

The hunters watching the match all gasped. Sun Xiaowu frowned, worried for Li Feng.

As the bull charged toward him, Li Feng suddenly felt a measure of unease. Can I really defend myself against a blow like this?

Given the momentum with which the bull was charging toward him, Li Feng would surely be heavily injured or worse if he allowed the blow to connect. As he felt the full force of the bull's aura, Li Feng shuddered.

"Die!" Wang Han's beady eyes gazed coldly at Li Feng. This combination attack was his signature attack: he would first freeze his opponents with [Terrestrial Wave], then charge at them with his transformation-type soulshard. Wang Han was eagerly anticipating the visceral joy of goring Li Feng with his sharp horns.

"You can do it!" Suddenly, Zhang Lie's affirmation broke through the terror that rooted Li Feng and sapped his fighting spirit.

"No! I can't lose! I won't lose! I'm a member of Team Zenith!" An explosion of genetic energy erupted from Li Feng. His body gleamed with resplendent, silvery armor, followed by a thick layer of dragon scales. His fists began to glow with spots of white light. "[Arclight Dragon's Imprint]!"

The moment right before impact, Li Feng pushed forward with two shining palms.

Chapter 170: Past and Present

Red and white genetic energy bisected the stage fragment where Wang Xuan and Li Feng met.

"Is this all you've got?" Wang Xuan smiled, his eyes filled with disdain. Was his opponent really going to try to block his charge with his bare hands? He might as well be asking to die!

In truth, [Arclight Dragon's Imprint] was a close-ranged body-focused framework, and Li Feng didn't think that he would lose in such a confrontation. He grabbed the bull by the horns. Rays of light radiated from his palms, dyeing Wang Xuan's vision white.

"What? This is impossible! How could this be?!" Wang Xuan, struck by a palpable beam of white light, was flung away like a kite whose string had snapped. His bull transformation was forcibly canceled in midair; he struck the green barrier that marked the stage fragment's edge before falling to the ground with a wheeze.

The audience below gaped at the sight.

"What's going on? Wang Xuan lost in a single blow too? But how? He's the top hunter in the Blackgold settlement, whereas Li Feng was nameless before this match!"

"Wang Xuan couldn't even last two blows against him? Damn, just how strong is Team Zenith?"

The outcome of the fight and the disparity between the two hunters was so obvious that it led to another wave of commotion. Zhang Lie and Team Zenith were simply too strong! Both Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng had won their respective matches with ease, and they naturally drew attention because of it.

Even Elder Bai and Su Feng seemed a little shocked by Li Feng's performance, especially considering that his opponent was Wang Xuan, who was being groomed to become the next Wang clan head.

"The winner of stage fragment #35—Li Feng!"

Li Feng himself was rather confused by what was going on. What had happened? How had his opponent lost so quickly? He had only launched one attack!

"You, Li Feng, on stage fragment #35! What are you still doing up there? Are you waiting for the next batch of competitors?" Elder Bai called out with a smile, prompting Li Feng to rush back into the stands.

Even the other members of Team Zenith seemed shocked by the ease with which he had won his battle.

"What's going on? Wasn't Wang Xuan supposed to be a strong hunter? He couldn't even take a single blow from Li Feng!" Sun Xiaowu murmured.

"And it wasn't even a blow at full power! You all saw how little time Li Feng had to charge up his technique," Zhou Ying added.

Wang Xuan seemed far weaker than was rumored.

"Is Wang Xuan really on the same level as Chu Feng and the others? I felt as though I could push him back with barely any force at all!"

Li Feng glanced curiously at his palms. Hearing his words, Sun Xiaowu and Zhou Ying were both increasingly convinced of Wang Xuan's weakness.

On the other hand, those hunters who were seated beside Team Zenith couldn't help but spasm when they overheard the conversation. Wang Xuan was a weak hunter?! Did these hunters from Team Zenith not have a sense of just how extraordinary they were?

"You all think that Wang Xuan's weak?" Fang Yi asked casually, after the other members of Team Zenith all settled on that conclusion.

Everyone but Zhang Lie and Sun Mengmeng turned to Fang Yi.

Li Feng replied, "He is, isn't he? I only used about two-thirds of my strength during that last attack, but he still wasn't able to counter it!"

"No, you're all wrong. It's not Wang Xuan who's too weak, but rather you, Li Feng, who's too strong! Count how many gene fragments you have, as well as the number of superior-grade soulshards, and the grade of your framework. Do you think most hunters here can compare?" Fang Yi explained directly.

As members of Team Zenith, they had all overcome numerous life-or-death trials, and they had all experienced a foundational breakthrough. Not only that, Zhang Lie had given them each a bottle of Potion #1, and they were now all at a hundred and sixty basic gene fragments each. Based on this alone, they were already far superior to Chu Feng and Yun Bing.

As for soulshards and techniques, they each had at least three highly compatible superior-grade soulshards, and their framework and techniques were honed from months of practice and training after their breakthrough.

It was only with Fang Yi's remark that they realized just how many benefits they had over a regular hunter, as well as how strong they had become.

The remainder of the first round continued over the afternoon, with Sun Xiaowu and Zhou Ying fighting their respective matches. With their strength, they naturally advanced to the next round without any trouble.

At the same time, the citywide stage of the tournament reached its apex in the city of Sacred Fire, on Mars. In Sacred Fire, the citywide stage of the tournament took on a different format. A number of arenas dotted the competition site. Each arena held a thousand hunters fighting in a free-for-all, with only the final victor in each arena being eligible to proceed to the next stage.

Countless bodies flew out of a fiery stage and smashed against the ground.

"Ah!"

"I lost just like that?"

"No, no! I won't stand for this!"

Those hunters who fell out of the arena howled with rage despite the severity of some of their wounds, but no matter how upset they were, they had lost their qualification to compete.

On the seventh arena, Yang Ze stood firmly on stage, staring at his one remaining opponent. The hunter who could defeat the other would advance to the next round.

"Oh, isn't this lad from the Yang clan?"

"You mean the bastard? I heard he went to Earth—I'm surprised he's thick-skinned enough to come back and participate in the Void Cup!"

Yang Ze could hear the taunts from the spectators as he prepared to face his final opponent, but by this point, he was more or less inured to their words. His background was no secret, after all, but he had come to terms with it. He clenched his fists as he focused on the faces of the members of Team Zenith. He would win this match, then return victorious to Earth to celebrate with his teammates!

As he glanced at Yang Yao, who was standing opposite him, his lips suddenly curled up in a smile. Wouldn't it be funny if he were to defeat Yang Yao here? That old fellow would surely be fuming! As the dust settled, the spectators nearby finally saw just who Yang Ze's last opponent was.

"It's Yang Yao!"

"Look at arena #7! The final two competitors standing are both from the Yang clan!"

"Looks like we're in for a treat! Yang Yao's the young clan head of the Yao clan, and he's not on good terms with Yang Ze. I bet they'll settle their score with each other here in the arena!"

"Settle their score? What do you think Yang Ze can do against Yang Yao? Would he dare to win against him?"

"Right, Yang Yao's to be the next clan head of the Yao clan, whereas Yang Ze's just a bastard. Wouldn't Yang Ze rather lose to get into Yang Yao's good books?"

"Shh! Be quiet! Don't you see that the Yang clan head's right there watching?"

Yang Ze, ignoring the crowd's comments, slowly walked toward the center of the arena.

From the other side, a youthful hunter in purple armor also strode forward, his face dark. The two of them glanced at each other as they approached, each noticing mirrored features in the other. The atmosphere grew tense. A hot wind began to blow, causing their clothing to flutter.

"Bastard, how could you be so shameless as to return to participate in the Void Cup? Admit defeat and I'll let you live!" Yang Yao announced, his tone contemptuous, as though his offer to Yang Ze was particularly generous.

Yang Ze didn't speak. He turned to the stands, where an older man was seated; the man turned away.

Yang Ze chuckled bitterly. "You're as annoying as ever, aren't you?"

Yang Yao's eyes narrowed. "You dare speak to me like this?"

Yang Yao summoned forth his genetic energy, a sensation Yang Ze was keenly familiar with. The complicated expression on his face resolved into a calm smile. "I dare. Not only that, I'll squash you like the bug you are! Let's give you a taste of your own medicine, shall we?"

"You? Just who do you think you are?" Yang Yao shot toward Yang Ze, who stood still and allowed him to draw close. Yang Yao grinned: he knew very well that Yang Ze's framework was a few grades lower than his own. Not only that, Yang Ze had left the Yang clan for quite a few years. Without any funds or resources from the clan, how could he hope to stand against him? "[Heaven's Blessing]!"

Dark purple genetic energy, the same color of Yang Yao's armor, enveloped the arena. Sensing the pressure, Yang Ze frowned.

As he drew close to Yang Ze, Yang Yao drew his spear back and made to thrust it through Yang Ze's neck, intending to decapitate and kill.

"The Yang clan's [Heaven's Blessing] can temporarily enhance a hunter's potential, and its strength can only grow with the hunter himself! It's a frightening technique, one that forms the basis of the clan's strength."

"Is Yang Ze just going to stand there?!"

"He's far weaker than his brother, after all, and he consumed much of his genetic energy getting rid of the other opponents in the arena. I'm afraid there's no hope left for him now!"

The outcome of the fight was already clear. Even Yang Yao thought that Yang Ze had frozen after the activation of [Heaven's Blessing] and was too shocked to react.

"Hah! [Heaven's Blessing] might be a strong technique, but there are certainly counters to it. Let me break your pitiful pride and show them to you myself! [Mirrored Refraction]!"

Pale blue genetic energy radiated from his body and quickly spread over the stage. At the same time, Yang Yao's spearhead thrust into Yang Ze's neck. The crowds fell silent, and the Yang clan head suddenly stood up from where he was seated.

"What? It's over?"

"Did he really kill his own brother?!"

"Ah, the Yang clan head's surely going to be upset now!"

"Upset? Yang Ze and his mother live like servants in the Yang clan. What's there to be upset about?"

Yang Ze's 'body' suddenly popped, exploding into a mist that blanketed the arena. Yang Yao turned around to the other side of the arena, where he could sense a strong fluctuation of water-attuned genetic energy. There, Yang Ze appeared.

"What? Yang Ze! You've even changed your framework?!"

Yang Yao raised his spear, his gaze narrowed as he took in Yang Ze once more.

"That footwork didn't belong to the Yang clan! Has he left the clan for good? But if he has, how could he hope to stand against Yang Yao? No matter how many times he escapes from Yang Yao's grasp, the only fate that awaits him is death!"

"What choice does he have? He's a bastard spurned by his own clan!"

As snatches of their conversation drifted over to Yang Yao, his face turned red and he brimmed with killing intent. Yang Ze! If not for Yang Ze, who would dare tarnish the Yang clan's reputation with their idle remarks?

"Yang Ze, this arena shall be your grave!" Yang Yao's voice turned hoarse as a huge wave of genetic energy erupted from his body.

A black soulshard glowed in Yang Yao's hands.

"Look, a superior-grade soulkiller soulshard! It allows Yang Yao to strike at a hunter's soul and spirit directly—with the additional boost from [Heaven's Blessing], wouldn't Yang Ze die just from a grazing blow?"

Several of the more keen-eyed hunters could immediately identify the rare soulshard that Yang Yao had just activated.

"[Desolate Silence]!" His body covered in a glowing purple haze, Yang Yao dropped his spear as the skies above the arena turned dark.

Yang Ze's expression was grave. As a member of the Yang clan, even an ostracized one, he knew the power of Yang Yao's framework and techniques very well. If he weren't mistaken, this blow would concentrate the power of [Heaven's Blessing] and release it all in a single moment as a fieldwide skill.

Once activated, it would annihilate everything and everyone around him. It looked as though Yang Yao wanted to end this match with a single attack, one that would hit him no matter how he tried to avoid it with his footwork technique.

"We'll see just whose technique is superior!" Yang Ze raised his broadsword, genetic energy gathering in a torrent around the blade. "[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!"

Water flooded the battlefield. A gigantic wave rose behind Yang Ze, one so tall it seemed as though it would drown him and Yang Yao both. So intense were the fluctuations in genetic energy that the crowd collectively sucked in a huge breath, their scattered conversations all suddenly paused.