

## U. Warlord 171

Chapter 171: The Defeated Yang Yao

"That's not a Yang clan technique, but it's still surprisingly strong!"

"I heard Yang Ze joined Team Zenith—you know, the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie's team!" After a short pause, a hunter volunteered some information about Yang Ze's current situation.

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie—you mean, the galaxy fighter? The lad who discovered limit fragments? Does that mean that Yang Ze returned to cut off his relationship with the clan completely, then?"

The Yang clan head, Yang Feng, was staring raptly at the fight, a curious gleam in his eye.

"Hah! Do you think a bastard like you would be able to best me? Die!" Yang Yao sucked in a deep breath as he struck with his spear, sending out missiles of wind that spiraled toward Yang Ze.

At the same time, Yang Ze released [The Boundless Blade], and a huge wave of water swept toward Yang Yao. Blinding light illuminated the battlefield as two rampaging bursts of genetic energy clashed against each other.

Most hunters were confident that the eventual winner would be Yang Yao, that his [Desolate Silence] would surely overcome Yang Ze's titanic wave of water.

"Die!" Yang Yao began to cackle, his eyes glinting with hatred. His distaste of Yang Ze was far stronger than anyone had expected.

The Yang clan head raised a hand, wanting to stop the fight, but he changed his mind at the last moment.

Everyone thought that Yang Ze was about to perish. With a last, dull crash, the violet light vanished completely, but the wave of water still remained. Winds scoured the arena. Yang Yao's gleaming [Desolate Silence] appeared far more impressive than it actually was; crashing against the waves, the attack lost all its momentum.

Yang Yao's confidence turned into horror as he gaped at Yang Ze. The technique he thought inferior and mediocre had crushed his own and was inexorably moving toward him. The spectating hunters rubbed their eyes in disbelief once the explosion from the clashing genetic energy had settled.

Had Yang Ze countered Yang Yao's strongest technique that easily? Even the Yang clan head's eyes widened as he clutched his armrests with visible shock. The outcome of the fight was far beyond his expectations.

Swept away by the tide frothing with sword energy, Yang Yao's armor was quickly sliced apart, and the waters around him turned bloody.

Yang Ze, just like Li Feng, was surprised by the strength of his own attack. Was it so easy to beat a hunter like Yang Yao? Yang Yao had received the best instruction and resources the clan could provide, and he was one of the top hunters in the settlement to which he belonged. How had he beaten someone like Yang Yao with a single blow?

Staring at the aftermath of the attack, the spectators were silent. Those hunters that had picked on Yang Ze in the past swallowed a gulp of saliva, afraid of his revenge.

"This is impossible!" Yang Yao, slumped on the floor and bleeding out, stared at Yang Ze with disbelief. Remnants of sword energy from Yang Ze's attack lingered in the air, and Yang Yao couldn't help feeling scared at the strength of Yang Ze's attack.

"Why should it be impossible? I said I'd step on you, didn't I? Watch me!" Activating [Mirrored Refraction], Yang Ze appeared by Yang Yao's side, then smashed his face against the ground with a brown boot. As he stomped Yang Yao's face into the ground, he glanced up at the Yang clan head in the stands.

"Yang Yao, where does the problem lie? With you, or with your father's foresight? Just look at how much of the clan's resources you've consumed! And yet you can't even handle someone like me? Aren't you too much of a weakling? Well? Are you going to surrender? Or will you let me crush you to death with my boot?"

Yang Yao's face was flushed scarlet with shame, embarrassment, and anger. When had he ever suffered such humiliation?

"Kill me if you dare! The Yang clan would never forgive you!"

"Ha! They, forgive me? Ever since my mother left, I've had no intention of forgiving the Yang clan. This is just interest on my part! I'll ask you one last time: will you admit defeat, or will you die at my hand?"

Yang Ze raised his broadsword and pointed it at his brother's head.

"Hold it!" Yang Feng shouted, no longer able to sit still. However, his shout accomplished nothing but to draw the crowd's attention to him.

In Sacred Fire, unless competitors admitted defeat, no one would be able to stop a fight to the death. Yang Ze's lips curled into a smile, but he didn't stop. His blade continued on its downward trajectory. If it were to land, Yang Yao's head would undoubtedly burst open.

"W-Wait! I admit defeat!" Yang Yao screamed out, unable to bear the pressure of impending death any longer.

By then, the tip of the broadsword was barely above Yang Yao's temple. If he had been any slower, he would have perished. When Yang Yao finally admitted defeat, Yang Ze smiled again as he sheathed his broadsword. "How does learning to behave like trash feel?"

Yang Ze turned and walked away without looking back at the defeated form of his brother.

The winner of arena #7—Yang Ze!

The overseer of the tournament coughed as the fight ended. "Send for the medics for Yang Yao!"

He turned to the Yang clan head, who was so embarrassed that he wished he could crawl into a hole. The Yang clan head glanced in the direction in which Yang Ze had departed before motioning for two Yang warriors to carry Yang Yao, who had lost consciousness from blood loss, away.

Amidst shocked stares, Yang Ze left the arena and returned to the stands.

At the same time, the other hunters of Team Zenith were celebrating the final two victories from their team.

The winner of stage fragment #598—Sun Xiaowu!

The winner of stage fragment #521—Zhou Ying!

The members of Team Zenith had all won overwhelming victories, and they, along with Zhang Lie, would be able to advance to the next round of the tournament. Such strength across the board was almost unheard of.

"His team has to be comparable to a special forces team from the military," Su Feng mused. He was very curious how a hunter who was barely in his twenties had managed to train such a strong team.

"Tomorrow, we'll proceed directly into the second qualifying round. The hunter who takes first place in the next round will head straight to the finals," Elder Bai explained, stroking his beard.

However, the hunters gathered in the plaza all shook their heads, uninterested in vying for that coveted position. After all, given Zhang Lie and his team's performance today, they were sure that it would go to one of the hunters of Team Zenith.

Ten thousand hunters in all had qualified for the second round; only a hundred would make it through to the third. The top ten hunters on the third day would each be awarded a prize, one that varied based on their placement. Given their performance, it seemed as though Team Zenith would take at least half of those top ten positions.

"Ah, let's leave! This must be one of the least exciting Void Cups in recent memory."

"Perhaps not—Zhang Lie and his team might be strong within Ning, but who's to say that other cities don't have their own freakishly strong hunters?"

"You must be joking! Don't you know just how strong someone like Wang Xuan is? He's surely capped out on gene fragments and superior-grade soulshards by now, but even he lost in a single blow! How strong could those from other cities be? I'm telling you, this Void Cup will be all about hunters who have broken through. I bet everyone from Team Zenith broke through long ago—Zhang Lie was the one who made the discovery, after all!"

"That's right, and I'm sure they've also found a way to make use of those limit fragments to the best of their ability. Compared to them, the rest of us hunters, who have just learned about these fragments, must seem like children—there's no way we can beat them! Ah, how I envy those hunters!"

Most of the hunters gathered in the plaza had lost their fighting spirit even though the Void Cup had barely begun. As they started to disperse, so did the spectators in the VIP stands. Wang Han was the first to leave.

"Indeed, you had better care for your son—what serious injuries he suffered!" the Heaven's Flame dojo leader mocked.

"Thank you for your concern, Dojo Leader. I'm sure you must be equally worried for your disciple, Sun Li. I can't imagine his injuries were any worse!" Wang Han retorted. He beckoned to his guards as he departed without looking back. "We leave now!"

As the crowds left, the plaza once again grew deserted. Zhang Lie and the others traveled back to the Zenith Dojo via hovercar.

"I didn't know we were so strong!"

"None of those hunters from the major clans could even beat us!"

Sun Xiaowu and Li Feng were both laughing at their 'newfound' strength. Their performance far exceeded their expectations, and it was only natural that they would behave in such a fashion.

Of course, they were the only two hunters behaving that way in their group of six. Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng both had a good understanding of their own strength, whereas Zhou Ying tended to be introspective and reflective.

"Don't get cocky just yet—don't you remember the target I set for all of you? Everyone performed well today, but we can't let our guards down just yet. There's a chance we might have to fight against each other.

To preserve your strength, let me set a rule for all of you: if you end up having to fight against each other, decide the victor with a game of rock-paper-scissors. In the second round, we'll each have to fight at least three matches, and as long as we don't encounter each other twice, we'll all be able to advance.

The third round will be a hundred-hunter free-for-all, followed by a series of placement matches for the top ten. If we work together, there's a good chance we'll all be able to make it. Do you all understand?"

"Yes, Captain!" everyone chorused.

In truth, the only opponents they were concerned about in the citywide stage were each other.

## Chapter 172: A Strange Atmosphere

Once they returned to the dojo, the hunters of Team Zenith were once again heaped with work.

After Wang Li, Xu Xiu, and Ding Qiang, a number of additional instructors had arrived at the dojo seeking employment, and they would be responsible for laying the foundation for the first batch of the dojo's disciples.

"Dojo Leader!" When the instructors saw Zhang Lie and the others returning, they all bowed. "Congratulations on your dominating performance!"

Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen, Wu Wei, and the other disciples cheered as they stepped inside the dojo. At their age, Zhang Lie and the other members of Team Zenith seemed to be essentially godlike beings.

Once the first round of the tournament finished, the news quickly spread all over Ning. It was a tremendous honor for the dojo's staff and disciples that their representatives had all made it to the next round of the tournament, and they were all proud that they too belonged to the Zenith Dojo.

Zhang Lie's gaze swept over everyone present. It looked as though the three disciples he had pointed out for specialized training—Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen, and Wu Wei—were indeed hard at work under the guidance of Wang Li, Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang.

To the three instructors, he asked, "How do you like working here? Are you getting used to it?"

"Yes, Dojo Leader! We've been training to make the most out of these new limit fragments we've obtained, and we're gradually familiarizing ourselves with our newfound strength."

"Good. Everything seems to be going well with the instruction as well. The training plan you've come up with seems to be working effectively, and you've all exceeded expectations. Once you're finished with your work, come see me. You'll each be able to choose a suitable pinnacle-grade framework for yourselves!"

The three instructors had only recently broken through, and they had spent the intervening period acclimating their bodies to their reduced level of strength. Now that they were ready, they could finally choose an advanced framework for themselves.

The frameworks and techniques in the dojo's collection were those that had been available to the hunters of Team Zenith, which Zhang Lie had obtained from a bulk purchase. He had chosen each technique with care, and this collection was one of the treasures of the dojo.

Huge smiles appeared on the three instructors' faces.

Zhang Lie then turned to the children behind them, who collectively sucked in a breath upon sensing his gaze. Was it finally time for what they were dreaming of?

"You should all have consumed a sufficient number of white-grub cores by now. After the second round of the Void Cup in Ning, all of you will have the opportunity to take part in a breakthrough trial," he informed them.

"Wonderful! It's finally time—we don't have to study the boring foundational technique anymore, we can move on to something better!" the children cheered again.

Deep into the night, those citizens of Ning who had spectated the Void Cup were still discussing the day's events with each other. Team Zenith's matches were of particular interest, and the once-nameless hunters of Team Zenith were experiencing an unprecedented growth in popularity. After all, given their incredible dominance during their respective matches, footage of those matches quickly circulated around the hunters of Ning.

Just one blow, and it was all over—and their opponents weren't weaklings, either!

"Head, Young Master Wang Xuan's suffered grievous internal injuries. I'm afraid he won't be able to participate in the elimination round tomorrow," an elder carefully reported to Wang Han.

"How many scions from the Wang clan have advanced to the next round?" Wang Han forced out a smile, but his body was trembling in rage.

"Only three, Head," the elder responded, sighing. Wang Han's gaze narrowed; clenching a fist, genetic energy exploded from his body.

How many years had it been since the Wang clan failed to dominate in the Void Cup? The citywide stage used to be trivial for scions of the Wang clan; now, they would be lucky to make it to the finals.

The Wang clan was the largest clan in Ning! Could they suffer the loss in reputation if none of their scions made it through to the nationwide stage of the Void Cup?!

"Head..."

Wang Han sucked in a deep breath. "Focus the clan's resources on those three hunters. They must get into the finals at all costs! Where's the nationwide stage going to be held this year?"

"The last time, it was in Tianfeng. This time around, it should be in the capital," the elder replied.

"Good. Inform our loyal hunters situated there that they're to kill Zhang Lie, no matter what!" Wang Han's cold voice shook the elder.

"Head, during the last clan conference—"

"I, the clan head, have absolute authority over the clan matters in times of dire circumstance. Do you doubt my words?!"

"No, Head! I'll arrange matters immediately!"

A blizzard had taken the capital by surprise during the last two days, and there was hardly anyone walking around at night. It was during such a night, however, that a restaurant suddenly found itself with three guests, who asked for nothing more than three bottles of strong spirits before they started conversing urgently with each other.

"You've all received orders from the clan, haven't you? What shall we do?"

"Let's wait for Zhang Lie to show up at the capital. We'll strike at his accommodations!"

"Do we have any information on our target?"

"His strength is hard to evaluate, but he's at least comparable to a peak second-realm hunter. He's able to handle two peak second-realm hunters working together, with a variety of tricks and strong, explosive techniques!"

"I understand. There's at least a week before the nationwide stage of the Void Cup, so we'd best prepare well.

The head wants us to get rid of this hunter at any cost!"

"Understood!"

The next morning, as the second round of the citywide stage began, countless hunters again flocked to the central plaza of Ning. The stage fragments were already hovering in the air, and the world federation, Chinese military, the Wang clan, and the Heaven's Flame Dojo's delegation were all settled in.

"It looks like you aren't feeling very well today, Clan Head Wang!" For some reason, the Heaven's Flame dojo leader continued prodding and poking at Wang Han.

Wang Han's gaze turned cold, and he stared back at the dojo leader with marked hostility.

The hunters came in droves; when the gathered hunters saw Zhang Lie walking in with Team Zenith, they immediately made way for them.

Staring at them were eyes of respect, admiration, awe—and also jealousy and envy. After all, in recent memory, no team from Ning had uniformly advanced to the nationwide stage of the Void Cup, and Zhang Lie's Team Zenith was slated to make history.

Team Zenith was undoubtedly one of the highlights of this tournament.

In the stands, as Wang Han saw Zhang Lie walking into the plaza, he narrowed his eyes. Almost as though he sensed Wang Han's hostility, Zhang Lie slowly looked in his direction, electrifying the air as their gazes met.

"The second round of the citywide stage will now begin!" Elder Bai called out.

"Please, I hope I'm not paired up with anyone from Team Zenith in it..." someone murmured.

The first batch of competitors was quickly announced on the screen behind Elder Bai, and one name stood out above all: Zhang Lie's. He was fighting on stage fragment #10, and his opponent was Liu Mo, a hunter no one present seemed to be familiar with.

The schedule immediately caused a big commotion.

"Look, Zhang Lie's in the first batch!"

"Who's this Liu Mo fellow? Thank goodness— he's saved the rest of us!"

"Liu Mo's the young master of the Liu cla—"

"Ah, forget it! Who cares where he's from? Do you think Zhang Lie will go easy on him because of it?"

As Zhang Lie headed toward his designated stage fragment, a quavering voice called out,

"I admit defeat!" Everyone turned to the trembling hunter who had spoken.

This was Zhang Lie's second opponent in a row who had surrendered before the fight had even begun! He still hadn't had a chance to show his skills! Was he going to be the first hunter to win the citywide stage without even fighting?

Some of the nearby hunters' faces twitched. Were they supposed to think of this Liu Mo as a decisive hunter, or a coward?

"The winner of stage fragment #10—Zhang Lie!" Elder Bai announced wearily.

Although it was only the second day, it already seemed as though Zhang Lie was the winner of this stage.

The second round passed without much further excitement, with no one opponent standing out in particular. Any matchup with a hunter of Team Zenith proceeded exceptionally quickly, and every member of Team Zenith continued their one-technique winning streak.

On Mars, in the city of Sacred Fire, Yang Ze was charting out his own undefeated path. What most terrorized the hunters of Sacred Fire was that Yang Ze would greet every victory with an astonished look on his face, as though even he couldn't believe how strong he was.

Elsewhere, however, things didn't go so smoothly; for example, in the capital. Chu Feng panted as he glanced at his opponent, a man whose features were shrouded by a black robe.

"What's the matter, Chu Feng? How long has it been since we last met—how have you become so weak?" the black-robed man taunted, his voice hoarse.

Chu Feng frowned. Although he couldn't see the man's features, his techniques and the fluctuations in his genetic energy were easy enough to identify. "And what of you, Qin Xiao? How's the life of an exile treating you?"

Qin Xiao's eyes turned cold as genetic energy flooded his body. The arena shook, and the very air itself seemed to become charged. "You want to die, do you?"

In response, Chu Feng narrowed his eyes as the wind began to howl.

#### Chapter 173: Dominating the Finals

"[Thunderburst]!" Qin Xiao roared out. His blue thunder-attuned genetic energy suddenly turned a deep purple. Directing the attack with his longsword, he released a frightening bolt of purple lightning toward Chu Feng.

"[Wings of Wind]!" Chu Feng was shocked by how much Qin Xiao had transformed within a short month. Wind-attuned genetic energy condensed around Chu Feng as a pair of wings sprouted from his back. Two slender rapiers appeared in his palms.

"Look, who's that? He managed to make Young Master Chu take him seriously!" a spectator exclaimed, instantly drawing attention to the fight.

"[Hymn of Wind]!" Chu Feng continued. Before the bolt of lightning could strike him, he crossed his two blades, triggering a storm around him. Blades of wind, as sharp as the real thing, whipped around him and forced Qin Xiao back.

The hunters present were all astounded at the confrontation between what seemed to be two elites. As purple lightning clashed against howling winds, green and purple genetic energy covered the battlefield. Blinding flashes and explosions left the audience unable to determine precisely what was going on.

After the violent clash, the arena was once again silent. In the aftermath, two figures stumbled out of a rising cloud of smoke.

Just as Chu Feng breathed out harshly and prepared to strike at Qin Xiao again, Qin Xiao spat out a mouthful of blood. He glared balefully at Chu Feng before gritting his teeth and raising an arm. "I admit defeat!"

By then, his hood had been blown back by the force of the explosion, and his features were clear to one and all.

"Ah, isn't that Qin Xiao? Wasn't he announced as Qin Lei?"

"That's right! He does look like Qin Xiao—could he be his twin?"

"No, that can't be: Qin Zongming only has a single son! Could Qin Xiao have... changed his name?!"

"Ah, you might be right! Don't you see how nervous Qin Zongming looks at the moment? I bet that hunter in the arena's Qin Xiao!"

"Really? Don't you know how arrogant Qin Xiao is? How would he be willing to admit defeat just like that?"

"Who knows? Perhaps he knows that he can't defeat his opponent, so he's deciding to preserve his strength instead!"

Some of the hunters had indeed guessed Qin Xiao's circumstances correctly.

Qin Lei—or, more accurately, Qin Xiao—intended on advancing through the stages of the Void Cup while hiding his true identity, but he was unlucky enough to encounter Chu Feng in the first match of the second round.

After the first attack, Qin Xiao realized that he wouldn't have a chance to take down Chu Feng unless he took extraordinary measures, so he chose to surrender instead. In the second round, he would have to fight three battles, and winning two would be sufficient to advance him to the next round. There was no need for him to waste his reserves of genetic energy and show his trump cards against Chu Feng.

The winner of arena #3—Chu Feng!

"Rejoice, Chu Feng. Rejoice that you're not my target, and I'll spare your life for the moment." Qin Xiao smiled at him, showing his teeth.

"Oh? It's not clear to me just who will spare whose life. Qin Xiao, looking at your pitiful appearance—let me give you a warning, even if you don't deserve it. Whatever grudge you have against Zhang Lie, drop it now. He's gone far beyond your comprehension!" Chu Feng whirled around and stepped down the arena, leaving Qin Xiao behind.

Although he had directed his words at Qin Xiao, they applied just as well to him. He could sense that he wasn't much stronger than Qin Xiao; if Qin Xiao was no match for Zhang Lie, then neither was he.

"Was that really Qin Xiao?" Chu Xun asked the moment her brother stepped back into the stands.

"Yes, that was him," Chu Feng murmured, glancing at his lone figure that had vanished within the crowds. He knew that Qin Xiao was hiding something, but he didn't worry about Zhang Lie's safety at all.

"What a pity! Is the young master of the Qin clan in such dire straits that he's lost even his own name?"

Following Chu Feng, the other young clan heads were slowly called to stage to face their respective opponents, but unlike him, they were able to beat their opponents easily. As usual, the citywide stage in the capital was largely a battlefield for the five major clans.

As the second day ended, in each region, the top hundred hunters citywide were quickly identified in preparation for the final round of the tournament the next day.

In Ning, as expected, Zhang Lie and the five present members of Team Zenith all entered the finals. This also meant that the finals, which should have been the most exciting round of the citywide stage of the Void Cup, was sapped of much of its enjoyment for those hunters in Ning: it seemed as though the top six hunters were already determined, and the remaining 94 hunters would have to compete with each other for the final four places.

Although the prizes that these final four participants would receive were very similar, placing in the top ten would allow them to participate in the nationwide tournament.

The moment Zhang Lie and the others returned to the Zenith Dojo, they immediately began to cultivate. Seated in one of the many arenas in the dojo, they cycled genetic energy through their bodies, each giving off a colored glow corresponding to their elemental affinity.

The dojo's new disciples were all staring at the figures on stage admiringly. However, Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen, and Wu Wei quickly shook themselves out of their reverie, then began focusing on their own training instead.

Meanwhile, Zhang Lie rushed into one of the practice chambers and started a simulation in preparation for his fight against the peak-grade moonlight wyrm.

"Simulating combat against a superior-grade wyrm-type lifeform," a robotic voice began. Light washed over the entire chamber, the walls of which seemed to transmute into the deep ocean.

Amidst a robotic whirring, rays of light swiftly condensed into a glowing ball. The next moment, an earsplitting howl rang from a distance as a large creature suddenly darted out of the water. Its slender, aerodynamic body was studded with purple scales. It held its head erect as it stared at Zhang Lie with eyes the size of lanterns.

"Simulation complete. Simulated lifeform: superior-grade deepsea wyrm," the robotic voice continued.

Zhang Lie suddenly opened his eyes, circulated his genetic energy, and activated his soulshards. The entire surface of the sea began to froth as Zhang Lie released a palpable aura.

"To think it could simulate a lifeform so realistically! This device really is worth the money I paid for it," Zhang Lie murmured to himself.

The wyrm attacked first, sending a wave hurtling toward Zhang Lie with a slap of its tail.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea]!" Zhang Lie thrust forward with his right palm. The wave met Zhang Lie's genetic energy in an explosion, one that rocked the surface of the sea.

The deepsea wyrm generated wave after wave, which Zhang Lie countered with his fists. Suddenly, a blood-red beam of light shone from underwater as a bloody dragon penetrated the wyrm's body, causing it to dissolve into fragments of light.

"Congratulations, challenger! You've overcome the highest-difficulty challenge!" As the simulation receded with the ocean, Zhang Lie deactivated his soulshards. He let out a sigh.

No, this won't do. The simulation only goes up to superior-grade lifeforms, and the moonlit wyrm will be far stronger. I won't be able to learn much from this, Zhang Lie thought to himself.

The reason he was testing out the simulation chamber was to determine how strong a superior-grade wyrm-type lifeform would be. This was the highest-grade lifeform that could be simulated with the technology that he had purchased, but it still fell short of Zhang Lie's expectations.

After all, the moonlight wyrm could well be the only lifeform in the first realm that had exceeded superior-grade. While the deepsea wyrm was strong even for superior-grade lifeforms, the moonlight wyrm would be on a different level entirely.

However, the fight had at least allowed Zhang Lie to understand that a battle in a water-saturated environment would strongly favor the wyrm. Fortunately, his framework was also water-attuned, and it would help him out as well.

"Tomorrow's the final round of the citywide stage in Ning, and the nationwide tournament will be a week later," Zhang Lie mused.

At that time, most hunters would be in the real world watching the competition, giving Zhang Lie enough time to strike in the dimensional world. In that case, that was when he would have to hunt down the moonlight wyrm.

The next day, Elder Bai expressionlessly read off the ten winners of the citywide stage.

The final round was staged on ten elevated arenas, each with ten fighters on them. The final fighter remaining in each arena would form the top ten competitors in Ning, eligible to advance to the nationwide competition. Of course, the outcome in six of those arenas was readily apparent, but the fights on the other four arenas dragged out for quite some time, almost as if making up for the lost excitement from the first six.

This might not have been the most exciting final the crowds had seen, but it was certainly the one that left them the most dumbfounded.

Chapter 174: Without a Doubt

As night descended, the final ranking for the citywide stage of the Void Cup in Ning was displayed on the screen behind Elder Bai.

#1, from the Zenith Dojo, Zhang Lie!

#2, from the Zenith Dojo, Fang Yi!

#3, from the Zenith Dojo, Sun Mengmeng!

#4, from the Zenith Dojo, Li Feng!

#5, from the Zenith Dojo, Sun Xiaowu!

#6, from the Zenith Dojo, Zhou Ying!

#7, from the Heaven's Flame Dojo, Su Na!

#8, from the Roaring Thunder Dojo, Ma Zheng!

#9, from the Wang clan, Wang Qing!

#10, from the Zhou clan, Zhou Hai!

As expected, Team Zenith took the first six positions in the citywide stage, leaving the remaining four positions to be evenly divided between the Heaven's Flame Dojo, the Roaring Thunder Dojo, the Wang clan, and the Zhou clan.

To the hunters gathered in the plaza, this was a foregone conclusion; the members of Team Zenith had displayed their overwhelming strength throughout the tournament, so much so that they shuddered just thinking about facing them.

"I hereby announce the end of the citywide stage in Ning!"

Su Feng and the Heaven's Flame dojo leader stood up from the stands, followed shortly after by Wang Han. Wang Han simply couldn't accept the outcome of the citywide stage—Team Zenith alone had taken the first six spots in Ning! Most importantly, Wang Xuan wasn't able to enter the finals because of his injuries, and he had lost an important opportunity to attend the nationwide tournament.

"As expected of the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, who displays the best qualities of China's soldiers," Su Feng complimented him.

He had expected Zhang Lie to win, knowing just how strong Zhang Lie was relative to those of his generation, but he was surprised that the team he led likewise performed so well. None of the hunters of Team Zenith had been famous before, but their time in Team Zenith had transformed them into exceptional hunters.

Su Feng was certain of one thing: he would try to make Zhang Lie continue instructing the special forces teams for as long as possible, so that his soldiers could experience the same rate of growth.

The Heaven's Flame dojo leader wore a complicated expression on his face. Compared to Zhang Lie, his position as the leader of the top dojo in Ning seemed far too inferior. Fortunately, he was no enemy of Zhang Lie and bore him no grudge of his own; their dojos were simply competitors. The Heaven's Flame dojo leader wanted to curb Zhang Lie's dominance, of course, but he knew that he wouldn't be able to do so.

"Congratulations, Dojo Leader Zhang—you and your team are both excellent. If you have a chance, please come visit the Heaven's Flame Dojo." The dojo leader patted him on the back.

The hunters in the plaza were shocked by the preferential treatment that Zhang Lie received from both the Heaven's Flame dojo leader and Su Feng; rather than treating him like a hunter of the younger generation, he seemed more like an equal.

"Zhang Lie, the citywide stage is over, but don't let down your guard just yet. Next up will be the nationwide stage!" Elder Bai murmured, wanting to see some anxiety on Zhang Lie's face.

Unfortunately, the outcome was disappointing: Zhang Lie's face didn't seem to change at all.

"Thank you for your advice, Elder Bai. I'll definitely keep it in mind," Zhang Lie replied, bowing politely.

Elder Bai inclined his head. Indeed, based on temperament alone, Zhang Lie seemed to be an exceptional hunter.

"Alright, let's give out the awards now and finish with the ceremony!" Wang Han sucked in a deep breath, his voice quavering, trying to get this nightmare over with as soon as possible. The positions that Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith had filled—those were meant to have gone to the Wang clan! He clenched his fists tightly, killing intent welling up in his mind.

The stage dissipated into thin air as the hunters gathered by the central plaza of Ning.

"The top ten participants in both the citywide and nationwide stages will receive a prize, something I'm sure all you hunters know very well," Elder Bai began.

This was traditionally how the Void Cup had been structured, and the hunters were indeed familiar with the prize distribution. However, Zhang Lie found his words rather curious. If indeed the prizes this time around were distributed similarly, then Elder Bai would have no need to bring this up.

"This time around, however, the world federation has agreed to open up its treasury for the top participants! The first-place hunter can choose up to five techniques, soulshards, and herbs of his

choice; the second-place hunter can choose three; the third-place hunter, two; the fourth- through tenth-place hunters, one!"

Everyone was shocked by this revelation, even Zhang Lie. The world federation's treasuries were sure to have quite a number of treasures, even if this one was only one of the smaller ones that was situated in Ning. This prize would certainly be a boon indeed.

More importantly, Team Zenith occupied six of the first ten positions, and they would be able to choose a total of thirteen items among them.

Everyone stared enviously at the members of Team Zenith, whereas Wang Han's face turned even more sullen. He had learned that the rewards for this Void Cup would be exceptionally generous, but not the extent of the generosity.

Picking anything they wanted from the Ning treasury? The Ning treasury was where the world federation kept much of the treasures it had amassed! It was one of the smaller treasuries, certainly, but the rewards within were still tremendous.

His killing intent toward Zhang Lie grew by leaps and bounds, but no matter how envious he was of Zhang Lie, the outcome of the citywide stage wasn't going to change.

"Thank you, Elder Bai!" Zhang Lie exclaimed in excitement, followed by Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, and the other members of Team Zenith.

"No problem. Once the award ceremony's over, I'll bring you to the treasury myself. I hope you'll be able to win the nationwide stage as well, to bring honor to Ning!" Elder Bai glanced at Zhang Lie.

"Yes, Elder!" Zhang Lie replied instantly.

After the award ceremony, Zhang Lie and the others followed Elder Bai to the world federation's treasury. It was smaller than Zhang Lie had anticipated, but the treasures within were sufficient to make his eyes light up in surprise.

Of the thirteen treasures that they could claim, they ended up taking back eight legendary-grade techniques, three superior-grade soulshards, and two rare herbs. One of the herbs, celestial grass, was a main ingredient for Potion #3, and Zhang Lie was overjoyed when he found it in the treasury.

With one of the key ingredients in hand, it seemed that he might be able to brew that potion even while he was in the first realm. After all, the nationwide stage would likely boast even more generous rewards than the citywide stage, and brewing Potion #3 in the first realm would strengthen his abilities to a ridiculous degree, one that far outstripped those of any hunter from the past.

A hunter's growth in the first realm represented his foundation; what heights would Zhang Lie be able to reach with this boon?

"The promised prizes have been distributed. Be at the plaza at 8 AM in three days' time; there will be a teleportation array here to transport you to the capital. Do not be late," Elder Bai emphasized, glancing pointedly at Zhang Lie. "Alright, I wish you all the best in preparing for the Void Cup, and I look forward to hearing about your performance."

Elder Bai smiled as he got into the hovercar waiting for him, whereas Su Feng and the others considered Zhang Lie appraisingly before they left.

"Zhang Lie, I hope you'll be as successful in the nationwide tournament as you were here," Wang Han gritted out, then turned to leave.

"Of course, Clan Head Wang!" Zhang Lie replied with a booming laugh.

"Captain, I fear he's planning something," Sun Mengmeng advised. The hunters of Team Zenith all stared at Wang Han's back with hostility.

"Don't worry. We're not so weak as to have to worry about the Wang clan,"

Zhang Lie reassured everyone. Team Zenith returned to the Zenith Dojo; with the citywide stage concluded, they would be heading to the capital in three days' time. Before then, they would have to focus on instructing their new disciples well.

As they arrived at the entrance to the dojo, the new disciples rushed out, their eyes gleaming as they crowded around the hunters of Team Zenith. The results of the tournament had already been publicized, and the disciples had all heard the news.

"Congratulations, Dojo Leader!" Wang Li, Xu Xiu, and Ding Qiang also rushed out. Despite knowing how strong Zhang Lie was, they hadn't imagined that he would be able to wrest the first-place position in the citywide tournament from the other major clans and dojos of Ning.

"There's no need to get so excited about doing so well in Ning alone," Sun Xiaowu loudly proclaimed. "I bet our captain will be first place overall for the entire Void Cup!"

The three instructors' eyes widened. Sun Xiaowu seemed as though he were boasting, but after seeing some footage of the tournament for themselves, they now had a clearer picture of Zhang Lie's true abilities. Even the nationwide tournament would likely not pose a large challenge.

Zhang Lie turned to the new disciples.

"Now that you've all consumed a sufficient number of white-grub cores each, it's time to prepare for the breakthrough trial," he announced.

His words struck the disciples like a bombshell. Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen and Wu Kui were all particularly excited; once they broke through, they would be considered official disciples of the Zenith Dojo, the first step on the path to greatness!

#### Chapter 175: Apprentice Qualifications

"Limit fragments are core to the Zenith Dojo, and they form the foundation for our disciples. Before the foundational breakthrough, none of you can strictly be considered official disciples of the dojo," Zhang Lie explained. However, except for Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen, and Wu Wei, the other disciples all blanched.

They had learned that the foundational breakthrough wasn't something that could be guaranteed; what if they failed to advance?

"Don't worry. Relax and let your training take over, and trust that your instructors have your best interests at heart."

"Yes, Dojo Leader!" the disciples chorused, each clenching their fists and preparing to do their best.

"Follow me!" Zhang Lie beckoned them all toward an indoor training chamber. The disciples looked uneasily around them as they entered and stood at its center.

"Dojo Leader, aren't we going to be taking our breakthrough trial? May I ask what we're doing here?" one of them timidly ventured.

"This is where we'll be conducting the trial," Zhang Lie responded.

With a rumble, the chamber suddenly began to shake so violently that the children thought that there was an earthquake. A red siren began to blare throughout the chamber, causing them to shudder and quake in fear.

"Your trial will be to remain here for half an hour," Zhang Lie commanded, then turned to leave.

"Dojo Leader! Dojo Leader, why are you leaving us behind?!"

"Don't, don't go!"

A number of the youths reached out to Zhang Lie in despair, trying to get ahold of him, but Zhang Lie didn't even look back.

"Stay calm, everyone!" Jun Jiuxiao suddenly shouted. He seemed to be one of the youngest in the crowd, but was the calmest of them all. Ye Xianchen forced herself to remain calm, but her eyes were still darting uneasily around her.

Their surroundings seemed to change: the cold, icy walls of the chamber morphed into cliffs. The children were stuck on a precipice, with countless ferocious beasts surrounding them from all sides, opening their maws wide as they waited for the children to fall into their grasp. The beasts began to howl. In the darkness, the sound carried, chilling the children to their core.

"Where are we?!" a boy began to wail, his voice turning shrill from fear.

"Just where is this place?!"

"Did the dojo leader leave us here to die?"

Outside the chamber, Zhang Lie and the others were spectating what was going on within.

The most important part of the foundational breakthrough was to induce adrenaline flow throughout the children's bodies. Most of these youth were from the slums of Ning, and they hadn't ever used a simulation chamber before.

This was undoubtedly the fastest and most reliable means by which he could induce a sense of despair and impending danger.

"Captain, nothing will go wrong, will it?" Sun Mengmeng asked after a brief moment of hesitation.

"If they wish to succeed as a hunter, this is an obstacle they shall have to overcome. Before the start of the trial, I warned them to have faith in their instructors. If they flee at the first hint of danger, can they truly remain loyal to our dojo? Take note of every child who screams about wanting to leave the dojo. We won't accept children like that as official disciples," Zhang Lie instructed.

He was well aware that this was a particularly challenging trial for children to overcome, but such was the nature of cultivation. If these children chose to be hunters, to step down this path of thorns, then they would have to face such trials sooner or later. The Zenith Dojo had prepared them as best they could for this trial, but in the end, they would determine whether they succeeded or failed.

From the outside, the trial didn't last much longer; from the inside, the children felt as though an eternity had passed. All of a sudden, the floor stopped quaking, and the environment in which they were trapped turned back into the four walls of the training chamber. The door to the chamber slowly opened up, and Zhang Lie and the other instructors walked inside.

Most of the youth had fallen to the floor, their gaze distant and their bodies trembling. What they had experienced was so shocking that they had still yet to come to their senses. However, there were a few children who were still standing upright, despite how badly their knees were shaking, Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen among them.

"Well?" As Zhang Lie's voice broke the silence of the chamber, the children turned to him.

"Dojo Leader? Dojo Leader, what was all that just now?" a few children asked. Their eyes were reddened, and tear tracks ran down their cheeks.

Zhang Lie didn't answer them. His gaze swept over the children before landing on Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen. Their faces were pale white, but their gaze resolute. Their genetic cores had, without their knowing it, undergone a metamorphosis.

"Show me the fist technique you've learned," Zhang Lie instructed.

Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen gritted their teeth as they mastered their bodies' shaking and got into battle-ready stances. Their fists shot out far faster and with more strength than before, causing both of them to gape at themselves in surprise.

Their constitution and senses had all been enhanced, and their stamina recharged to some extent. Otherwise, they should have been unable to muster up any strength after the traumatic experience they had just suffered.

Zhang Lie nodded: Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen had both broken through successfully. Of the other sixty or so children, fifty had also broken through, a startlingly high success rate.

"If you didn't break through just yet, don't worry—you'll still have another chance. However, those among you who cried out asking to leave the dojo during the trial are no longer welcome here. Leave at once," he commanded, his voice turning from gentle warmth to icy coolness.

"Dojo Leader, please, I was simply so frightened! Please don't chase me out!" several of the children wheedled, but Zhang Lie ignored them all. He motioned for Sun Mengmeng to herd them out.

"Fang Yi, I'll leave the other disciples to you. Those who have broken through, follow me!" Zhang Lie instructed.

Fang Yi led the remaining disciples into another trial, one that would challenge their minds and bodies—though in a different manner. The remaining disciples, all exultant at having succeeded in their first trial, followed Zhang Lie happily.

Now that they had successfully entered the Zenith Dojo as official disciples, their lives would surely change for the better.

"Behind this door lies the full set of techniques the Zenith Dojo has to offer to its disciples. However, before we head inside, I want to ask you all a question: have you ever considered your future?" Zhang Lie paused before a thick robotic door.

Jun Jiuxiao's eyes gleamed. His palms shook with anxiety and excitement.

"I want to become an existence like you, Dojo Leader," he began.

"I want to marshal my fate!" Ye Xianchen continued.

"Me too! I want to become strong!" Wu Wei and the others piped up, clenching their fists.

Young and inexperienced though they might be, their tone was resolute, their will unwavering. Zhang Lie saw a sea of expectant faces staring firmly in his direction.

For a moment, he thought he saw himself reflected in their gaze, the past him who had slowly crawled his way up from the slums. Despite his youth, he was already firmly aware of the darkness that the world held in store for those like him. His experience in his youth had given him the firm resolve he needed to walk further and further down the path to cultivation; for these children, it might have been much the same.

"Very good," Zhang Lie said. "I'm looking forward to your future accomplishments."

"Dojo Leader, I want to become your disciple!" Jun Jiuxiao suddenly shouted out loud.

"Oh? But you are."

"Really?"

"Of course!"

"No, no, that's not what I mean, Dojo Leader! I—"

"You want to be my apprentice?"

Jun Jiuxiao, Ye Xianchen, Wu Wei, and the others all kept their eyes focused on Zhang Lie's face, straining their ears to make sure they caught every syllable of what he was going to say next.

"I'll consider it, as long as you meet my qualifications," he continued.

In truth, not even the members of Team Zenith could be considered his apprentices. They were his teammates, more equals than disciples, but ones to whom he would occasionally give pointers. And all the children gathered here were disciples of the dojo, but none were at the point where they could be called his apprentices.

He was quite interested in Jun Jiuxiao's initiative.

"Dojo Leader, may I ask what these qualifications are?" Jun Jiuxiao pressed.

"Simple enough: once you choose an appropriate framework for yourself, head into the dimensional world. Within a month, kill ten basic lifeforms on your own. Everyone who meets these requirements will be eligible to become my apprentices," Zhang Lie promised.

The children all drew a breath. The dimensional world was a lawless realm, dangerous and bloody—and they were no more than thirteen- or fourteen-year-olds! There were still a few years before they would have been forced to enter the dimensional world for the first time, and Zhang Lie's trial was overly difficult for them.

After all, the first time anyone entered the dimensional world, they wouldn't be able to choose to which settlement they were sent. As a result, they couldn't even count on anyone or anything for protection.

Upon hearing the requirements for the trial, Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen blanched. As expected, it would be a difficult task indeed to become one of Zhang Lie's apprentices. However, wasn't it worth the risk? Zhang Lie, the Dragonwolf, had been the first to discover the existence of limit fragments, and if he could become one of his apprentices...

"I'm willing to take the trial!" Just as Zhang Lie was about to shake his head, thinking that Jun Jiuxiao had asked the question merely on a whim, Jun Jiuxiao responded in the affirmative.

#### Chapter 176: Gathering in the Capital

Jun Jiuxiao's face was stark white, but he ultimately overcame his fear and chose the path of the strong.

"I, I shall do the same!" Hearing that he was willing to take on the trial, Ye Xianchen, beside him, volunteered as well.

"Very well, but you'll both have to choose an appropriate framework first." Zhang Lie glanced thoughtfully at the two children's faces. No one else volunteered for the trial; for most of the disciples, just entering the Zenith Dojo was more than enough for them.

Zhang Lie advised them in choosing their own frameworks, then handed off the disciples to Sun Mengmeng. He personally brought Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen to the dojo's teleportation array to the dimensional world.

"Are you both certain that you want to participate in this trial?" Zhang Lie asked again, noticing their unease.

"Yes, Dojo Leader, we're certain!" Their fear was tempered by their resolve.

"In that case, I hope for your success." Zhang Lie handed each of them a small microchip, clapped their shoulders, and had them walk through the teleportation array.

In two flashes of light, Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen entered the dimensional world for the first time. Whether they would survive their trial would depend entirely on them. All Zhang Lie did was to hand them a guide explaining the key differences between the real and dimensional world, as well as pitfalls they would have to be careful not to fall into.

With the disciples' affairs settled, Zhang Lie and the others of Team Zenith once again piled into their training chambers.

In the capital, after the conclusion of the citywide stage, a cheerful, festive atmosphere once again descended on the crowds. After the citywide stage would be the nationwide stage, and China's competition would be one of the highlights of the entire Void Cup.

However, this iteration of the Void Cup seemed rather unusual, so much so that even Yan Long, the Chinese representative from the world federation responsible for the nationwide stage, was shocked beyond belief upon reviewing the information from the citywide stages.

"Is this information reliable?" He turned to Luo Lie, a member of the capital's military, who was by his side.

"Yan Long, how long has it been since you became the overseer of the Void Cup? Has the data you received ever been wrong?" Luo Lie shook his head, and Yan Long turned back to the data in disbelief. The Wang clan and Heaven's Flame Dojo had both been defeated by a dark horse, the Zenith Dojo.

The members of Team Zenith hadn't lost except when they faced each other in the finals, and, even more shockingly, their team captain Zhang Lie had won the entire tournament without fighting even once. Just what sort of hunter could command such fear and strength?

If reports of such success were solely isolated to Ning, he might have suspected some trickery at play, but even in Sacred Fire on Mars, the top competitor was once again a hunter from Team Zenith.

Yang Yao, long groomed as the successor to the Yang clan, had been defeated in a single blow. Yan Long knew the Yang clan quite well, and he even knew of the enmity between Yang Yao and Yang Ze. The two of them were essentially bitter enemies; would either of them throw the match for the other?

And yet Yan Long still found it difficult to accept such overwhelming strength. "Luo Lie, if this is how strong the hunters of Team Zenith are, just how frightening is Zhang Lie himself?"

"I met the lad during the Kez invasion at the capital, and he risked his life to kill a three-star black-tipped scarab! Then, during his dojo's opening ceremony, no less than Su Feng saw him defeat a third-realm hunter in a single blow. He was the one who discovered the existence of limit fragments, so he might have even more secrets and tricks up his sleeve—I doubt anyone from the younger generation will be able to best him."

Luo Lie had an extremely vivid impression of Zhang Lie owing to his military background. Zhang Lie's participation against the Kez invasion and Su Feng's recognition and fondness for him made Luo Lie think quite highly of him as well.

Yan Long began roaring in laughter. "A dark horse indeed, but it seems like he's one to look out for, eh? I'm expecting a good showing for him on the worldwide stage, then!"

To the two officials, these were nothing more than idle remarks made in jest, but some others couldn't bear to hear their words any longer.

"Oh? The tournament hasn't yet been held, and the results aren't yet out. Who's to say who will win the nationwide stage?" A cold voice interrupted their conversation, causing Yan Long and Luo Lie to pause as they glanced at the abrupt interlocutor, the head of the Long clan, Long Xiao.

The nationwide stage was organized by the Chinese military, but some of the larger clans in the nation were also given the right to sit in the VIP stands. Naturally, the Long clan from Lingnan was among them.

"You're here early, Clan Head Long! The tournament only starts tomorrow." Yan Long greeted him as he securely stowed the data in his hands.

"It only makes sense to arrive early to such an important event," Long Xiao replied, initiating a further discussion on the tournament to begin tomorrow.

Clans from all around the country steadily arrived at the capital in such large numbers that even the capital's streets gradually became crowded. The central region close to the arena was especially bad, flooded as it was with a throng of people.

Even the rich and famous had no choice but to mill around the region like the regular citizens who lived there. The hotels in and even all around the capital were all fully booked, and the hunters who found themselves unable to find a room had to camp outside the city or in the parks within.

"Ah, there are so many hunters even in the suburbs?"

"Well, there's nothing we can do—the nationwide tournament for the Void Cup starts tomorrow."

"I might have participated during another iteration, but not this year for sure—imagine trying to face down the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

The next morning, a commotion could be heard from the north of the capital. A large, black mass was flying toward the capital from a distance, much like an enlarged albatross. As it entered the capital's airspace, the onlookers realized that it was a giant airborne fort.

"It's the military's airborne fort, here to oversee the tournament!"

"But they haven't done anything like this in past years, have they? It must mean that the Chinese military's placing particular emphasis on this year's Void Cup!"

The hunters who saw the fort were eagerly discussing the reasons behind its appearance.

As it hovered in midair, a huge whirring noise came from the center of the capital, and the hunters felt the ground beneath them quake.

A silver hemisphere began to form over the air, its base a circular perimeter that encapsulated the tournament grounds within it. The military's airborne fort hovered where the cap of the hemisphere would be, as though it were the keystone that held the barrier in place. The fort slowly began to revolve as ion cannons appeared protruding outward, securing the airspace from outside interference.

After the barrier had been constructed, a fleet of hovercars arrived from the distance, stopping right outside the barrier. A number of figures walked out, chief among them the Chinese government's liaison to the world federation, Yan Long, and the Chinese military commander Luo Lie. They would be joint hosts for the nationwide stage of the Void Cup. Behind them were the clan heads of the five major clans of the capital, along with its most famous dojo leaders.

Their arrival prompted the hunters gathered nearby to begin flocking toward the barrier.

Four figures blended in with the crowd.

"The tournament's right about to begin. The teleportation array at the center of the capital has been disabled, so that fellow will have to come through one of the arrays in the suburbs. We need only wait," one of the hunters began.

"But what about the military's airborne fort?" Another hunter looked hesitantly through his binoculars.

"Don't worry. Our target's just one person, so there won't be a huge commotion. Is everyone ready? Pay attention to each of the nearby teleportation arrays!"

The four figures spread out as they darted toward each of four different arrays situated around the capital.

Back in Ning, Zhang Lie had made preparations bright and early in the morning, as had the rest of Team Zenith. After instructing Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang about handling the dojo's affairs in his absence, Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith walked toward the teleportation array.

"Right, Yang Ze's also preparing for the finals on Mars, isn't he?" Sun Mengmeng suddenly asked.

"Yes, Sacred Fire isn't too far away from the Martian capital. Given his temperament, I bet he's already waiting at the capital by now," Li Feng replied, smiling.

None of them seemed at all anxious about the tournament to come.

"You guys better not get too relaxed," Zhang Lie warned. "Once again, we're striving for all of us to make it through the nationwide tournament and onto the worldwide stage!"

"Yes, Captain!" everyone shouted. The six of them stepped into the teleportation array together.

#### Chapter 177: Courageous

As more and more hunters arrived at the capital, the golden arena in which the competitors would be fighting materialized from thin air. The VIP stands were already filled with major clan heads from all over the country, as well as notable dojo leaders and officials from the world federation.

Outside the protective hemisphere, troops from the capital's military were verifying each competitor's identity; those spectators who had no affiliation or background were forced to remain outside.

Compared to the citywide stage, the nationwide stage was clearly far more concerned about security, so much so that an airborne fort from the military had been mobilized. The various clan heads were glancing at the competitors slowly trickling into the stage, as though searching for one hunter in particular.

"I heard that that fellow barely made it to the citywide stage in Ning on time. Is he going to be doing the same here?" Yan Long frowned.

He was very curious about the members of Team Zenith and their captain, Zhang Lie. However, despite the fact that most hunters had already gathered by the tournament grounds, there was no sign of any member of Team Zenith.

"I wonder if this fellow decided not to show up," the Long clan head murmured.

A few more hovercars arrived, bringing the Wang, Li, and Qin delegations to the tournament. The three clan heads stepped through the barrier and headed straight for the VIP stands.

"Hoh? What are the Wang, Li, and Qin clan heads doing here?" the Chu clan head, Chu Lin, teased.

Almost everyone present knew that the Wang clan's genius had been eliminated by Team Zenith's Li Feng, leaving the Wang clan with only one representative in the nationwide tournament.

Wang Han's face turned dark. "This is the nationwide stage of the Void Cup, after all," he gritted out, forcing his tone to remain genial. "It's not an event to be missed."

"Perhaps so, but I'd like to remind all of you not to do anything untoward to any of the competitors," Yan Long warned. He didn't care what sort of grudge the three clans bore toward Zhang Lie; this was a tournament he was responsible for, and he certainly didn't want to take the blame if anything were to happen.

"Don't worry, Official Yan. As major clans, would we stoop so low as to take revenge on a hunter of the younger generation?" Wang Han smiled.

The other clan heads kept their eyes peeled, sure that something unexpected was going to happen during the tournament.

Just as the tournament was about to begin, the members of Team Zenith stepped out of a teleportation array to the south of the capital.

"What's going on? Why are the streets of the capital so empty?" Sun Xiaowu remarked, glancing all around him.

No one wandered down the broad streets, and they could barely see a few hovercars in the distance. The silence that enveloped the capital made it seem like a necropolis.

"Ah, look! That's the military's airborne fort!" Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi's gaze landed on the massive floating object in the sky that was blotting out part of the sun.

"We'd better hurry. It looks like the tournament's about to begin!" Zhang Lie shouted. He didn't want to be late once again. However, the moment he stepped forward, he felt strong fluctuations in genetic energy from his vicinity.

Gusts of cold air surrounded the hunters. Zhang Lie turned back to see something seemingly hidden in a small alley to their back, but moments later, the thing vanished, replaced by a sudden noise. A golden bridge of light arced downward from the distance, stopping by Zhang Lie's feet.

"What's this?" Sun Xiaowu asked, uncertainly.

"A... special passageway for the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie?" Zhang Lie's face spasmed as glowing golden words appeared on top of the bridge.

Meanwhile, in the tournament grounds, the crowds could all see a golden bridge arcing into the distance, as well as the words that floated into the air.

"What's going on?"

"Doesn't it tell you right there? It's a special passageway for the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"Ah, so he's arriving?"

The competitors murmured to each other upon seeing such obvious preferential treatment.

"Isn't this the first time that this has happened in the history of the Void Cup?" someone exclaimed, glancing enviously at the bridge.

"The Chinese military is doing quite a good job of protecting its favored hunters, isn't it?"

Long Xiao and Li Mo's faces darkened. That the military had specifically done this for Zhang Lie was a clear sign of his importance, and whoever dared strike at Zhang Lie under such circumstances would surely face grave reprisal.

A few hovercars rushed off toward the other end of the bridge in a wave of neon lights, causing the murmured conversations from all around to grow even louder. Not only was Zhang Lie getting his own passageway, he was getting his own escort! Wasn't this far too much favoritism?

"Official Yan, isn't this far too grand an entrance for just Zhang Lie alone?"

"Indeed, he's just a hunter of the younger generation, nothing more..."

"If your clans also boast a hunter comparable to Zhang Lie, I wouldn't mind giving that hunter a special passageway too," Yan Long replied to Long Xiao and Li Mo, rendering them temporarily speechless.

Zhang Lie narrowed his eyes at the special passageway that extended right to their feet.

"Are they worried that we'd get lost?" Fang Yi joked.

A few hovercars rushed across the bridge and stopped in front of the members of Team Zenith. Zhang Lie didn't move. He glanced back at the alleyway, where the mysterious sensation of pressure he felt had vanished.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Zhang Lie. The Chinese military has opened up a special passageway to escort you to the tournament. Please, follow me!" A soldier walked out from a hovercar and greeted Zhang Lie politely.

"My thanks," Zhang Lie responded, following the others into one of the hovercars.

Once they left, a few figures walked out from the alleyway, their faces shadowed. "Damn it, just why would the military value him so highly?!"

"We'll have to wait for the next opportunity to strike," another figure murmured.

As dark purple genetic energy shrouded the figures, they vanished from sight and floated into the distance as if they were ghosts.

Most of the crowd was staring at the far end of the bridge, trying to spot the hovercars bearing Zhang Lie. They appeared from the horizon, rushing straight for the tournament grounds.

Long Xiao's face darkened. Li Mo clenched his fists, eyes filling up with malice.

As the hovercar stopped in front of the barrier, Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith walked out. After a short silence, quite a few hunters among the crowd burst into applause.

Zhang Lie scratched the back of his head as he waved to them all, feeling somewhat self-conscious at all the attention heaped in his direction.

"Dragonwolf, if not for this passageway, would you have arrived late again?" Yan Long teased him, a measure of appreciation in his gaze.

Long Xiao and Li Mo stared at him evilly, whereas Qin Zongming and Wang Han frowned in distaste. The military favored Zhang Lie far more than the major clans had realized, and this preferential treatment gave the clan heads a surprising sense of pressure.

"I wouldn't dare, Official Yan. This is the nationwide tournament, after all!" Zhang Lie didn't even look at Long Xiao and Li Mo.

"Now that everyone's here, let me formally announce the start of the nationwide tournament of the Void Cup!" Yan Long shouted, then followed up with a series of announcements before the opening ceremony.

"It looks like Zhang Lie will be the champion this year, won't he?" Chu Feng sighed as he glanced at Zhang Lie. Compared to him, his status as the young master of the Chu clan seemed meaningless.

Yun Bing's eyes were fixated on Zhang Lie as well. She had never felt a sense of security from any man before, except when she was with Zhang Lie.

"Ah, Sister Yun Bing, you're not in love with Zhang Lie, are you? You'd better not be—he's mine!" Chu Xun suddenly whispered to her, causing her pale cheeks to flush.

"Don't speak nonsense, Chu Xun, or I'll have to punish you!" She puffed up her face and pretended to roll up her sleeves as she whirled around to face Chu Xun.

Chu Feng stilled at the sight; as far as he knew, Yun Bing had never behaved in this manner ever before. It seemed as though she really was, at least a little, enamored with Zhang Lie. Should he be glad or upset that there was a hunter like Zhang Lie among the younger generation?

Of course, they who knew Zhang Lie well would at least fare much better than some of the brash and arrogant hunters who didn't know a thing about Zhang Lie at all. Many of those hunters were planning on taking down Zhang Lie and shifting all the attention to themselves, a plan that Chu Feng and Yun Bing had the foresight to veer far away from.

## Chapter 178: A Dominating Victory

The three brothers of Meng considered themselves contenders for Zhang Lie's throne. They were known as the three kings of the grasslands: the wolf king, Zhou Kai, the eagle king, Zhou Qi, and the horse king, Zhou Wan. They looked toward Zhang Lie with malice in their eyes, excited for the fame and attention they would receive for defeating him.

Just then, Yan Long finished his speech and announced the start of the nationwide tournament. The names of the competitors appeared on screen behind him.

"Those competitors whose names are on-screen, prepare for battle immediately!"

Curiously, Zhang Lie again found his name listed: he would be fighting in the first arena.

"Damn it, I'm facing Zhang Lie!" one of the hunters in the crowd shouted in vexation.

"Haha! Looks like it's time for you to surrender! Haven't you heard that every competitor that Zhang Lie matched up against chose to do so?"

"Right, what if he accidentally uses too much strength and kills you?"

Many nearby hunters began to tease the unfortunate competitor.

"Surely I'm not so scary..." Zhang Lie murmured, walking toward the first arena.

One black-robed hunter was particularly focused on Zhang Lie. "If only he were my target! But I don't have to worry—I'll eventually fight him if I win enough." The hunter cackled a few times, the malice and madness in his laugh causing those around him to give him a wide berth.

Once all the designated hunters were in their respective arenas, the first match of the tournament began. Except for Zhang Lie, the other hunters were all rather middling hunters, with nary an exciting fight among them. Naturally, attention piled up on the first arena, where Zhang Lie's opponent, recognizing that he would be no match for Zhang Lie himself, chose to surrender.

"As expected of the Dragonwolf, he won without having to fight once again!"

Amidst frenzied discussion, Zhang Lie shook his head as he left the arena, again the first hunter to do so.

"This fellow..." Yan Long's face spasmed.

"Hoh, when do you think he'll actually have to fight for once? If he gets the grand prize without doing anything at all, even I'd be jealous of him!" Luo Lie seemed to be recalling his own experience as a competitor of the Void Cup.

Now that Zhang Lie had won his first match, he would be free for quite some time. There were only about thirty cities who were qualified to host citywide tournaments in China, and the top ten hunters from each city would qualify. As a result, there were three hundred participants in the nationwide tournament. Of those three hundred, the top ten would go on to participate in the worldwide tournament.

The first round of the nationwide tournament was a one-on-one battle; the winners would advance to the second round, and the losers would participate in a free-for-all for a few coveted positions to advance. Fortunately, none of the members of Team Zenith met each other in the first round, nor any hunters they were familiar with, and all of them successfully advanced to the second round.

In the capital, the first round had just ended; on Mars, the first round was just beginning.

In the Martian capital, Yang Ze found himself the object of attention. His competitors would shoot him curious looks from time to time, trying to identify just what was so special about the hunter of whom so many rumors had been spoken.

"So this is Yang Ze?"

"Yes, that's Yang Ze, bastard son of the Yang clan! Apparently, he became really strong after joining Zhang Lie's Team Zenith, and he defeated Yang Yao easily!"

"What? Yang Yao too?! Who on Mars can defeat him, then?"

"You never know—what about the geniuses from the Ma, Jin, and Mo clans?"

The spectators from the Yang clan frowned at the rumors and discussion that were circulating among the gathered hunters. Yang Ze's rise was undoubtedly a mark of shame against their clan; a bastard had defeated the most celebrated Yang scion in a single blow!

The Yang clan head looked toward Yang Ze with a complicated expression on his face.

"The tournament will commence shortly," announced a military officer from the Martian federation, a man with silver braids.

The rather parched Martian land suddenly began to groan as a robotic sound came from deep underground. A crack spread across the ground as an arena emerged from sight. Amidst a cloud of red dust, the large arena split into ten fragments, just as was done in China.

Yang Ze clenched his fists tightly.

"On the seventh arena, Yang Ze VS Mo Tian," the military officer read off.

Yang Ze sucked in a deep breath as he walked toward the arena. Watching him, the Yang clan head suddenly felt his heart wrench.

"The clan has made its decision," the first Yang elder murmured, sensing his errant thoughts. The Yang clan head sighed and nodded, his eyes clearing up.

As Yang Ze stood in the icy-cold arena, his opponent, Mo Tian, slowly strode up to him.

"Who would have expected that a Yang exile would be able to go so far? Your strength is indeed quite shocking," Mo Tian commented idly.

Yang Ze raised his head and smiled, looking him in the eye.

"The first match begins now!"

Yang Ze circulated his genetic energy. There was no need to speak; his actions would speak for themselves. He launched [Fists of the Silent Sea], quickly followed by [Three-Wave Crescendo].

A thick, dense wave of water-attuned genetic energy headed in Mo Tian's direction, and Mo Tian reacted with a few attacks of his own. As he made to defend against Yang Ze's blows, Yang Ze suddenly leapt up, a gleaming sword somehow having made its way into his hand. "[The Boundless Blade: Yawning Wave]!"

Water-attuned genetic energy doused the arena. A huge wave of water swept toward Mo Tian, followed quickly by waves of sword energy. Mo Tian was forced back stumbling by the wave of water; he had no defense against the waves of sword energy that followed.

As his body was flung out of the arena, Yang Ze became the first victor of the round.

"The winner of arena #7—Yang Ze!"

The Mo clan head frowned, his face darkening. Mo Tian was the last of the Mo elites still in the tournament, and his defeat now would lose the Mo clan all representation in the Void Cup.

The crowds were silent as they processed the shockingly fast victory. Before they could react, Yang Ze had already walked off the arena and back to the stands.

Back in China's capital, the tournament was progressing far faster than anticipated thanks to the overwhelming strength of the members of Team Zenith. The second day of the tournament posed no challenge to them; they continued to advance with overwhelming strength.

The spectators at the capital, just like those in Ning, found themselves speechless, as did Yan Long, Luo Lie, and Su Feng. How long had it been since such a superior hunter had appeared during the Void Cup?

Even if Zhang Lie were excluded, the performance of the members of Team Zenith were still far superior to that of any other faction represented at the tournament.

"Just what sort of monster is he?" Su Feng murmured, watching the tournament from his office in the Blackwind Fort. His special forces troops had adapted remarkably quickly to their new limit fragments after receiving personalized instruction from Zhang Lie.

That night, as the members of Team Zenith discussed the day's fighting, Zhang Lie stood alone and silent in the dojo's training ground, raising his head to look up at the radiant moon.

A cloud floated across the moon, momentarily shrouding the sky in darkness. Zhang Lie felt a sudden inspiration. He activated [Eclipse], positioning the moon of its domain exactly where it was in the night sky.

Dark clouds crept over the moon, slowly enveloping it in its midst.

As Zhang Lie continued releasing genetic energy, a dark serpent appeared around him. It ascended toward the moon, devouring it bit by bit. Zhang Lie felt a curious thrumming in his head, as though he had become the moon being devoured by the serpent. Subject to this curious sensation, Zhang Lie found the devouring process proceeding surprisingly smoothly, but his consciousness was likewise fading away.

"Desist immediately!" he heard from afar. Zhang Lie clutched his head and immediately awoke from his trance.

He had somehow managed to combine his consciousness with the domain of [Eclipse]. As the serpent devoured the moon, so too did it devour his lifeforce; if he hadn't canceled the skill, he could well have died where he stood.

Sweat dripped down Zhang Lie's back. He took a deep breath and turned in the direction of the shout: Lin Xiu was leaning against a pillar as he considered Zhang Lie. Zhang Lie was shocked—when had Lin Xiu arrived? He hadn't noticed him at all!

"Thank you," Zhang Lie called out.

Lin Xiu grunted noncommittally, then left after seeing that Zhang Lie was fine.

The next day, Zhang Lie arrived at the capital early. When he did so, there were only a few hunters in the tournament ground, all of whom frowned and stared warily at the members of Team Zenith: these members were whom the hunters would have to face if they wanted to advance.

Chapter 179: Qin Xiao's End

"Let the tournament begin!" Yan Long announced.

Zhang Lie watched a trembling hunter in front of him skeptically; after the announcement, just as he was preparing to circulate genetic energy throughout his body, his opponent instantly surrendered.

Long Xiao and Li Mo watched the tournament for a few seconds before simultaneously standing up to leave, followed quickly by Wang Han. They didn't have the patience to watch such a one-sided

match, nor the interest in Zhang Lie to warrant their doing so. Only the Qin clan remained; Qin Zongming calmly watched the tournament from his seat in the stands, unbothered by the departure of the other clan heads.

His gaze was fixed on a hunter on the second arena, one clad in black. His features were obscured by the hood that covered his face, and quite a few hunters were staring at him because of his odd getup. His opponent was none other than Fang Yi.

"So you're my opponent," the black-robed man murmured, his ice-cold voice filled with disappointment.

Fang Yi didn't speak. He clutched his black spear tightly in his hands as he circulated his genetic energy. Wind wrapped around him; lightning crackled.

The black-robed hunter slowly disrobed.

"Qin Xiao?!" Fang Yi cried out, seeing his pale, gaunt face.

"What? What's Qin Xiao doing here? Isn't he still being chased after by a few major clans? Look, the Zhou clan's right there!" The competitors in the arenas, as well as the hunters in the stands, immediately began to whisper to each other.

The Zhou clan head, Zhou Ruo, stared at Qin Zongming with an icy demeanor.

Qin Zongming shrugged off his stare; he had other things to worry about. This wasn't an opportune time for Qin Xiao to reveal his identity at all.

"Ha! You didn't expect it, did you? I was planning on revealing my identity only when it came time to take down Zhang Lie: be honored I'm doing it for you." Qin Xiao's voice suddenly turned hoarse.

"Do you think someone like you can take down our captain?" Fang Yi snorted. He pushed [Rondo of Wind and Storm] to its extreme as he prepared to launch a strike against Qi Feng.

"You've grown arrogant after your time with Zhang Lie, haven't you? Let me remind you, while you were playing in the mud as a kid, I was already the top hunter of the Blacksteel settlement! Die!"

He licked his parched lips as he glanced toward Zhang Lie, who was leaving his own arena after winning his battle. However, all he saw was Zhang Lie's back. Despite the murmurs of all the hunters around him, it seemed as though Zhang Lie hadn't ever looked in his direction.

"I knew it was you, Qin Xiao!" On the seventh arena, Chu Feng glared at Qin Xiao; Yun Bing, on the third arena, also glanced his way after dealing with her opponent. The three hunters still had unfinished business with each other.

"Official Yan, what's going on? Why was this convict allowed to participate in the Void Cup?" Zhou Ruo questioned Yan Long.

Yan Long frowned. The Void Cup was open to all hunters who registered in the dimensional world; since everyone could participate, the officials had been rather lax when it came to confirming the competitors' identities. It wasn't strange that Qin Xiao had managed to fool the officials, but the fact that he had chosen to reveal his identity so publicly would make things difficult for them.

"According to the rules of the tournament, Qin Xiao is eligible to participate," Yan Long replied, taking a deep breath.

Zhou Ruo fumed: Qin Xiao had caused the death of his own son!

Qin Zongming glanced at Zhou Ruo, worried about what he was going to do next. However, after taking a deep breath, Zhou Ruo actually seemed to calm down quickly. "Very well. If these are the rules, then there's nothing I can do."

The commotion from Qin Xiao's sudden appearance gradually quieted down, and Qin Zongming sighed in relief.

"[Heaven's Judgment]!" Fang Yi's eyes glinted as he thrust his spear toward Qin Xiao.

[Heaven's Judgment] was a lightning-attuned technique. It caused flashes of golden light to flare throughout the tournament ground as Fang Yi struck, highlighting the potency of and the skill he had reached with the technique.

Fang Yi seemed to morph into a bolt of lightning as he shot forward.

"[Thunder Raiment]!" Qin Xiao called out, coalescing a suit of thunder armor against his body right before Fang Yi struck.

A bolt of lightning seared the onlookers' eyes.

"Haha!" Qin Xiao laughed out loud. His armor technique was a perfect counter to Fang Yi's attack.

Nevertheless, Fang Yi's face remained as calm and impassive as before. His surety suddenly gave Qin Xiao a premonition of unease. "[Heaven's Judgment: Thunder's Wrath]."

The lightning-attuned genetic energy scattered about the arena coalesced into a ball of light, one which exploded against Qin Xiao's armor. Qin Xiao screamed as he was flung out of the arena, his body battered and bruised.

"This is impossible!" he shouted, his body smoking from the force of the lightning.

In the stands, Qin Zongming's eyes widened in shock. The strength that Fang Yi had demonstrated was far superior to Qin Xiao's, despite the fact that Qin Xiao had consumed a restricted potion even before taking the stage.

Why? Why were the members of Team Zenith so strong?

"Qin Xiao was defeated so easily—how could this be? Even if he's been expelled from the Qin clan, he was still once one of the top hunters in the Blacksteel settlement!"

"Just how strong are the members of Team Zenith?!"

Many hunters glanced cautiously at Fang Yi, still holding his spear beside him.

As he flew to the edge of the arena, Qin Xiao gritted his teeth and forced the pain aside as he firmly grabbed the edge of the arena to prevent himself from falling outside, but as he slowly got up, the wounds on his body began leaking fresh blood. Untied, his long, unkempt hair fluttered in the wind, giving him the demeanor of a crazy maniac.

"Ha! It's impossible, isn't it..." His once-handsome features scrunched up in a grimace. If he couldn't even beat one of Zhang Lie's teammates, how could he hope to beat Zhang Lie himself?

"Give up!" Qin Zongming thundered from the stands.

However, Qin Xiao didn't pay him any heed. He retrieved a test tube from his soulspace, one filled with a mysterious liquid.

"Is this a restricted potion?" Yan Long frowned as he glared at Qin Zongming.

"Today, you'll suffer as I have!" Qin Xiao pried open the test tube and drained its contents.

Fang Yi frowned as he turned back to Zhang Lie, but Zhang Lie didn't pay Qin Xiao any heed. From the moment Qin Xiao uncorked the test tube, Zhang Lie recognized it as a stimulant, one whose side effects were so deleterious that they were even worse than the superior-grade blood ant's soulshard. To add insult to injury, the boost it conferred, though rather significant, would only last for a short period of time.

His eyes turned bloodshot. After using two restricted potions in a row, regardless of the outcome of this match, Qin Xiao's cultivation would be forever stunted.

"Die!" Crackling lightning gathered on Qin Xiao's pitch-black polearm. His hair flying in the wind, his body temporarily bulging with muscle, Qin Xiao was a fearsome sight to behold.

Fang Yi faced his opponent seriously; given the potions he had consumed, Qin Xiao's strength might well rival his own.

"Relax. He won't be at your level, no matter how many potions he drinks! You can defeat him!" Zhang Lie shouted from a distance.

"Hah, dream on! The next one to die is you!" Qin Xiao shouted back. His body was thrumming with explosive strength, rendering him temporarily fearless.

Fang Yi sucked in a deep breath as genetic energy exploded from him.

Qin Xiao dashed forward using the Qin clan's footwork. The signature Qin framework and techniques all focused heavily on offense. After consuming the two restricted potions, Qin Xiao was able to use those techniques to their extremes.

The strength of his attack caused the entire arena to shudder. His eyes gleamed with light and his lips curled up. He was sure that even Zhang Lie, let alone Fang Yi, would be hard-pressed to defend against the attack. He could already sense himself taking down Zhang Lie and being crowned the king of the first realm.

As Qin Xiao approached, Fang Yi suddenly turned ephemeral with an activation of [Floating Clouds]. Though he remained visible, his body seemed to be trapped in a spatial distortion, unable to be touched. "[Heaven's Judgment: Pinnacle]."

White light flooded the arena.

Zhang Lie raised his head sharply: this was likely the technique that Fang Yi had been working on recently. "Using this to defeat Qin Xiao..."

Zhang Lie shook his head, no hint of worry in his features.

"Captain, don't worry, it wouldn't be a disgrace even if Fang Yi were to lose. After all, Qin Xiao consumed a restricted potion!" Sun Xiaowu shouted. Everyone except for Zhang Lie was watching the fight with rapt attention, as though the outcome was still yet uncertain.

"There's no doubt that Fang Yi will win," Zhang Lie announced confidently.

As he spoke, two streaks of lightning clashed against each other, enveloping the entire arena in a blinding flash of light. Not even bothering to shield his eyes, Yan Long observed the scene. "The victor has been decided."

As the light grew dim, revealing the competitors' figures once again, Fang Yi stood in the middle of the stage, a strange expression on his face. He had yet to use his full strength, and yet Qin Xiao had already fallen to the ground, struck by countless blows of lightning...

Qin Xiao lay to the side of the arena, his body spasming as blood seeped out of his orifices.

"Xiao'er!" Seeing Qin Xiao in such a state, Qin Zongming leapt from the stands directly onto the arena.

However, the moment he left the stands, Zhou Ruo, who was seated not far from him, quickly followed suit. Zhou Ruo blocked Qin Zongming's path forward. "Clan Head Qin, the match isn't over yet. Don't you feel like you're overstepping your bounds?"

"Scram!" Qin Zongming shouted. Given the severity of Qin Xiao's injuries, he would surely die of blood loss if they weren't treated in time. If he couldn't even protect his own son, what was the point of his power and reputation?

#### Chapter 180: A Frightening Disparity

"This match has yet to conclude. Clan heads, return to the stands! I will send for necessary treatment once one party surrenders," Yan Long commanded, forcing the two clan heads to leave.

As Qin Zongming trudged back up, he stared at Zhou Ruo balefully, as though he wanted to swallow Zhou Ruo whole.

"Xiao'er, surrender! Your life's more important!" he called out, eyeing Zhou Ruo in warning as he did so.

"I-I surrender!"

The winner of arena #7—Fang Yi! As Qin Xiao surrendered, the name of the victor appeared on the screen behind Yan Long, and Qin Xiao, who had been so arrogant just moments ago, was quickly carried off like a dead dog. The combined effects of consuming two restricted potions, as well as the grievous injuries he had suffered, would undoubtedly end Qin Xiao's path as a cultivator prematurely.

Fang Yi stowed his spear as he left the arena. By that time, the results of the other simultaneous matches were out, as was the list of competitors who would participate in the finals. Except for the members of Team Zenith, the only other hunters who had qualified were Chu Feng, Yun Bing, and one hunter each from the He and Qian clans.

This was the first time that an entire team had qualified for the finals of China's nationwide tournament, an accomplishment that was quickly flaunted by the media.

"I knew it! The Dragonwolf Zhang Lie will surely be the victor of China's nationwide tournament! He's the pride of the Ning slums!"

"What nonsense are you spouting? The results aren't even out yet."

"Ha! Given his track record, do you think Zhang Lie will lose?"

The residents of the slums were heatedly discussing the likelihood of Zhang Lie's success with gusto as they watched the tournament play out, and similar conversations were happening all over the country.

"As usual, rewards will be handed out to the top ten participants, and this year's rewards will be exceptional indeed. Rest well and prepare yourselves for the battles to come tomorrow," Yan Long announced, his gaze pausing on Zhang Lie's body for a moment.

Chu Feng and the others chuckled bitterly. Based on Team Zenith's performance that day, the rest of them would be relegated to placing seventh through tenth.

After the tournament, teams of hunters began to depart from the capital.

"Zhang Lie, you haven't found any accommodations, have you? Why not come stay at my dojo? It's free of charge for you."

"Ha! Zhang Lie, my dojo's far better, and you're always welcome there."

"No, he should come stay with the Huang clan!"

Quite a few clan heads and dojo leaders began walking purposefully toward Zhang Lie, smiles plastered on their faces, as though they were hotel managers trying to acquire more guests.

"Alright, alright, stop crowding around! Mr. Zhang, Official Yan's inviting you to join his delegation!" Luo Lie shouted as he made his way toward Zhang Lie.

Even Zhang Lie was surprised that Yan Long had extended him an invitation.

"I'm not dreaming, am I? To think Official Yan himself would be interested in us!" Sun Xiaowu exclaimed.

"Thank you." Zhang Lie accepted the military's invitation and joined their party.

"Ah! If I had befriended Zhang Lie before he rose to power and fame, do you think that I'd be as strong as the members of Team Zenith by now?" Quite a few hunters watched Zhang Lie depart with frustration at their lack of foresight, at their cruel reality.

Luo Lie brought Team Zenith to a luxurious manor located in the center of the capital, rather than a military fortress. Armed soldiers stood outside the entrance to the manor, and there were even a few troops patrolling the interior. When the guards saw Zhang Lie and the others approach, the two guards trembled, as if trying to hide something.

"This is the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, invited at Commander Yan's personal behest," Luo Lie introduced.

The two guards bowed and stood aside, allowing Luo Lie to bring the members of Team Zenith in.

"That was the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, wasn't it?"

"Surely we're not dreaming?"

They were loud enough that Zhang Lie could still hear their murmurs from quite some distance away.

"You're a hero to many soldiers in the military," Luo Lie explained.

Indeed, Zhang Lie had gradually become used to such treatment after his participation against the Kez invasion. While they spoke, the hunters walked deeper into the manor, into corridors that were ever more densely populated with armed guards.

"These are Commander Yan's personal quarters, so security is a little tight." Luo Lie paused in front of a robotic door, which slowly opened with a whirr. He beckoned them in. "Commander Yan will await you all inside."

Zhang Lie peered inside. The exterior of the mansion looked rather lavish, but the interior seemed plain and ordinary. The spacious chambers had little in terms of furniture and accoutrement, and it gave off a surprisingly lonely sensation.

"Do you find it surprising that my rooms are so plain?" Yan Long's voice boomed as he approached. He had taken off his military attire and was instead dressed in a set of plain robes.

"Greetings, Commander Yan." Zhang Lie and the other members of Team Zenith bowed.

"I'm shocked that every member of Team Zenith seems to have made it into the finals," Yan Long began. He motioned for them to sit, then instructed the housekeeper to prepare a pot of tea.

"No, no, it's just a matter of luck."

"No need for false modesty," Yan Long replied. "To be honest, I'm hoping that you'll be willing to provide some training for some of the world federation's troops under my command."

Just like Su Feng, he identified Zhang Lie's potential, and wanted to develop a friendly relationship with him, and he wanted to improve the strength of his own troops.

"This isn't a problem, Commander, but I won't be available until next month at the earliest." Zhang Lie made up his mind quickly.

Yan Long blinked in surprise; he didn't expect that Zhang Lie would agree so readily. The reason Zhang Lie had done so was because he had knowledge of the future: if the world federation's forces didn't grow stronger, how could he prevent mankind's past fate? How was mankind to grow strong enough to defend itself against ever more powerful foes?

While the other members of Team Zenith relaxed and went to sleep, Zhang Lie suddenly wondered about how Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen were faring.

In the first realm of the dimensional world, outside the Dragonsoul settlement, Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen were panting as they explored the outskirts of a nearby forest, the carcasses of two basic-grade lifeforms at their feet.

The two youths had been in the dimensional world for just over a month, and they had just met the last requirement for Zhang Lie's trial—though at a steep price. Wounds covered their bodies, large and small. They had encountered quite a few mutated-grade lifeforms along their way, and if not for their wits and the body-reinforcement technique that Sun Mengmeng had taught them, they might have been filling up a lifeform's belly at this moment.

"We're finally finished!" Ye Xianchen murmured in joy, her voice trembling from relief and fatigue. As she laughed, she began to cry, thinking back to how much she had suffered over the last month.

"Yes, it's finally over!" Jun Jiuxiao murmured, relief equally evident in his eyes.

"Instructor Xu, Instructor Ding!" Tired beyond compare, the two youths fell unconscious the moment they returned to safety, teleporting back to the dojo grounds.

Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang rushed over to the slumped forms. Xu Xiu sighed: it looked as though the two children hadn't rested a whit in order to fulfill the conditions of Zhang Lie's trial. After carrying them to bed, Xu Xiu and Ding Qiang immediately sent notice to Zhang Lie about their return.

The next day was the finals of the nationwide tournament, but, curiously, many of the spectators had already left the capital, well aware of the foregone conclusion.

"Well met, Zhang Lie!" Chu Feng and Zhang Lie bowed to each other.

As Chu Feng activated [Wings of Wind], Zhang Lie combined [Eclipse] and [Ninecarp Transformation], producing such tremendous pressure that Chu Feng was unable to step forward.

"I surrender," Chu Feng shouted, a complicated expression on his face as his [Wings of Wind] dematerialized. The reason he had struck was to get a sense of the disparity between him and Zhang Lie. From the beginning, it was clear that Zhang Lie's strength was far beyond his own, and, indeed, far beyond his comprehension.

After Chu Feng was Yun Bing, who announced her surrender immediately as the match started. Her strength was comparable to Chu Feng's, and if Chu Feng wasn't able to close in on him, she would suffer the same fate. Why embarrass herself needlessly?

In the end, every other hunter in the top ten—members of Team Zenith and the two hunters of the He and Qian clans—surrendered to him without a fight. They had seen enough from Chu Feng's performance against him.

As a result, the spectators of the nationwide stage were as dumbfounded as those of the citywide stage had been...