

U. Warlord 231

Chapter 231: The Free-For-All Begins

However, no matter how enraged Phoenix was, he couldn't do anything about Zhang Lie at the moment. The Void Cup had its own rules, and even if he were the prince of the winged, he still had to obey these rules.

The competitors would be separated into four arenas by an incorruptible AI, so even if the winged had the ability to kill Zhang Lie and the other competitors from Earth, they would all have to be assigned to the same quadrant first.

Furthermore, even if that were the case, they would have to search through all the competitors of the quadrant to find the Earthlings, a tedious task to accomplish within the timeframe of the first round.

That was why Phoenix gritted his teeth.

The remaining three prime races also made their appearance.

Their bodies surrounded by a film of water, the aquatic race took the stage with a huge wave of water. Their leader, the strongest of the younger generation of the aquatic, known as the most beautiful princess in the Milky Way, Princess Lianna, strode into view.

She and her teammates were all clad in sapphire-blue satin and a diaphanous gauze of water. The aquatic race was female-only, and the aquatic competitors who took the stage were at the prime of their strength and health. Their appearance immediately drew heated roars and whistles from the crowd.

After the aquatic race came a few races only slightly below the level of the four prime races, but although the crowd still cheered for them, it was hardly at the level of applause that the winged, the aquatic, or even Zhang Lie's Team Zenith, had received. Finally, the nightdemons and starbeasts took the stage.

The nightdemons had dark exoskeletons; from the distance, they didn't look like living creatures, but rather statues carved out of obsidian. Most were around two to three meters tall, with a frightening aura surrounding them all. A majority were humanoid, but some took the form of beasts.

Shortly after the nightdemons' appearance came the starbeasts. They boasted the highest base stats of all known lifeforms in the Milky Way; some of the top-tier members of the race were able to travel through space with no protection beyond their skin.

Most looked like beasts from Earth, but they were no less intelligent than any other lifeform present at the arena. The runic inscriptions on their skin, with bright starry spots, made them look mysterious and arcane.

Their leader, Stellar Dawn, was the strongest member of the younger generation of starbeasts, as well as one of the most likely candidates for the starbeasts' next clan head. He was a gigantic qilin over three meters tall, with scales as bright as silver and streaked with dark whorls reminiscent of space.

The appearance of the starbeasts caused the crowd to howl. Respect was afforded to the strong, no matter their appearance.

The four prime races had all gathered within the competition grounds. However, the tournament had yet to begin in earnest, because the competitors had to be sorted into their respective quadrants.

Lines of data filled the large screen onstage, listing out the top teams in each of the four quadrants. The same information was transmitted to each competitor's transceiver.

The four quadrants each represented a distinct ecosystem: desert, swamp, forest, and ocean. Each was unique in its own manner, and different teams would be stronger or weaker depending on the environment. For instance, the aquatic competitors would exhibit a very different performance in the desert quadrant compared to the ocean quadrant.

As for Zhang Lie and the others, the forest quadrant would be most compatible with them, and the worst would be the desert or swamp quadrants.

"Forest—wonderful!" Yang Ze called out. The other hunters heaved a sigh of relief, but Zhang Lie's eyes flashed.

"Don't get too excited just yet. Have you seen the 1001th team in the same quadrant?"

The hunters looked through their transceivers and rapidly found the relevant line of information.

"Ah, the nightdemons?!"

"At least we didn't encounter the winged, but..." Chu Feng murmured.

"Not just enemies, but allies as well. Team 1545 is the night spirits!" Yun Bing added.

"Allies? Can we really rely on them? After all, the night spirits are an offshoot of the nightdemons, and we'd be lucky if they didn't help out the nightdemons against us instead," Sun Mengmeng murmured.

Zhang Lie laughed. "You're not wrong, Mengmeng. We're just business partners, if that. As for the nightdemons, we don't have to discuss a strategy against them immediately. The battlefield's so large that we might not even come across them during the first round. Furthermore, it wouldn't be a big deal even if we really had to fight. The nightdemons know that we're not a force to be trifled with, and it's in both our and their interests that we keep out of each other's way," Zhang Lie continued, ending the discussion.

The competitors claimed specialized wristwatches from the tournament officials as they stepped into a teleportation array, through which their entire team would be sent to a randomized location in the arena.

Each competitor was worth one point. There were around 170,000 competitors in each quadrant, which meant that the average score to advance would be 170 points.

That meant that each competitor would have to defeat an average of 170 elites from all over the galaxy to advance, a task of overwhelming difficulty. Furthermore, there were few restrictions on the competitors' manner of fighting—poison, traps, trickery, fighting, brawling, and even assassination were all permitted.

Team Zenith stepped forward into the teleportation array, a sight that Fu Bo, Ye Mo, and the others were paying close attention to.

Fu Bo roared out, "Mistress, the Earthling ants have just stepped into the forest quadrant. Let's hurry up too!"

Pu Kui didn't deign to respond, but she did speed up.

Fu Bo was very petty. After being treated like a clown during Ye Mo's banquet, he had returned maligning the Earthlings. Accordig to him, the Earthlings were arrogant, prideful, and completely idiotic, and the theory of limit fragments that Zhang Lie had devised was riddled with inconsistencies, with nothing to show for it. His mistress, convinced by his words, naturally had a warped impression of Zhang Lie and the others.

As more and more competitors crowded around the teleportation array, the night spirits stepped forward after seeing the nightdemons. As an offshoot branch of the nightdemons, they had little agency against the nightdemon competitors; indeed, if necessary, they would be forced to give up their accumulated points to the members of the main branch.

Under these circumstances, it was ridiculous to expect that they could help out the Earthlings. The most that Ye Mo would be able to do was to warn them of impending conflict.

The other competitors in the forest quadrant quickly stepped into the teleportation array, and the free-for-all began in earnest.

Zhang Lie and his team found themselves teleported to a small, burbling creek, with tall, deciduous trees all around them.

"Yang Ze, weave a fog of water all around us, and Zhou Ying, use the plants all around us to help search for possible targets. Everyone else, stay alert!" Zhang Lie commanded.

In his past life, Zhang Lie certainly didn't boast the qualifications to enter this sort of competition, but that didn't deter him from making rapid, decisive commands now. In a free-for-all brawl, they had two main objectives, first, to protect themselves, and second, to accumulate whatever points they could.

The soft glow of water-attuned genetic energy suffused Yang Ze's body, and clouds of fog began to spread out around him. The fog traveled surprisingly quickly, and the region around him, a kilometer wide, was soon shrouded from sight.

As for Zhou Ying, she was reaching into the earth and sensing the tremors and life of the land within five kilometers of her. If anyone were to step into her domain, she would notice immediately.

Zhou Ying's root network and Yang Ze's cloud of fog were both techniques that Zhang Lie had taught them. Under his instruction, their understanding of their elemental attunement, along with the flexibility and precision of their elemental manipulation, grew tremendously.

Not half a minute later, Zhou Ying found their first prey. "Captain, there's an enemy team three kilometers to the northwest!"

Chapter 232: An Auspicious Start

"Are there any other teams around?" Zhang Lie asked.

"No, Captain! I suspect they were just sent over here by the teleportation array."

"In that case, let's go!"

The members of Team Zenith rushed forward, followed quickly by Yun Bing and Chu Feng.

Three kilometers away, the half-demon tawny foxmen competitors had just landed in the arena when they heard a whoosh of wind from their left flank. Before they could react, a firebird dove down toward them.

"Enemy attack!" one of the foxmen called out.

However, the firebird was only a distraction; the crackle of thunder came from all around them, and vines wrapped around their ankles like snakes. The foxmen began activating all manner of genetic techniques, but the vines that had wrapped around their ankles were far more resilient than they had expected.

It took two or three strikes before they finally broke apart, but more would creep out from the earth and continue holding them in place. Above them, the crackling of thunder grew closer and closer.

"[Heaven's Judgment: Rain of Thunder]!" As Fang Yi waved his obsidian spear around, masses of black lightning struck the foxmen with overwhelming strength.

Two of the foxmen competitors, caught out in the attack, were only able to fend off two bolts of lightning even with their full strength; by the third bolt, they had fallen over unconscious, their fur charred and smoking. As the foxman leader blocked a fourth bolt, he called out in shock, "The opponents are too strong! Retreat!"

Based on the density and strength of their genetic energy, these competitors seemed more like peak second-realm hunters than first-realm ones. What could the foxmen do but run off and hope that they weren't caught?

The eight-men team hurriedly got into formation, wind-attuned genetic energy gathering by their feet. "[Warren of a Thousand Foxes: Wind's Charm]!" The eight foxmen stood in the eye of a whirling green tornado, which shot out blades of wind all around them.

Zhang Lie had to admit that all those who had made it to the galactic stage of the Void Cup were strong hunters, and he even praised how quickly the foxmen were able to respond to their sneak attack. Of course, it wouldn't be enough to save them.

"[The Boundless Blade: the River Lethe]!" An underworld river rushed toward the tornado, causing a whirling mass of desolation in the heavily forested area.

The tornado, formed by the combined efforts of the eight foxmen, resisted the river's force for quite some time, but before it could fully stabilize, a golden fist, along with a radiant dragon, shot toward its center.

As the attacks smashed into the tornado, the figures of the remaining eight foxmen could be seen running off in eight separate directions.

"Spread out and escape!" the foxman leader called out, but his final command was meaningless. Almost as he spoke, he felt a piercing pain by his shoulder, followed by a baptism of fire.

Flaming arrows struck down each foxman, though their injuries were deliberately nonlethal. The foxman leader closed his eyes in surrender. Against such foes, they wouldn't be able to escape. Their participation in the Void Cup had come to an end.

Just who were they facing? What foe had vanquished them so easily? They were surely in the upper echelon of competitors even on the galactic stage, and the foxman leader was certain that the only foes that could defeat them in such a dominating fashion had to boast a strength near or comparable to the four prime races.

He could hardly hide his shock when Zhang Lie appeared in front of him. The Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, which almost all articles had pointed to as a clown, a foolish, egocentric man? It was him, it was the humans! The humans had been the one who defeated them!

"No, no, how could this be?" he murmured hoarsely to himself. Was he subject to some sort of illusion spell? Surely that had to be the case! Mankind had had a few rising stars, just as did any other race, but humans were generally thought to be one of the lesser races, and the foxman leader simply couldn't accept the reality that he had been bested by such foes.

Even Chu Feng and Yun Bing were shocked by Team Zenith's strength.

Everyone knew that Team Zenith was strong, but not how strong. In the intervening few months between the worldwide and galactic stages, the hunters of Team Zenith had taken a great leap forward in strength.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing turned toward Zhang Lie. It had taken him only three orders and five minutes to find an opponent team and decimate it entirely...

By the time Chu Feng and Yun Bing arrived at the scene, the fight was already more or less over. Even more frightening was the fact that this likely wasn't Team Zenith's true strength. None of the hunters appeared to be winded, and Zhang Lie didn't even have to lift a finger.

They were certain of one thing: breaking through the basic gene fragment capacity wasn't the pinnacle of the theory of limit fragments—no, it was just the beginning! They turned to Zhang Lie covetously.

"Before I change my mind, hand over your points!" Ignoring the scorching gazes from behind, Zhang Lie threatened the foxman leader.

"Well met, Dragonwolf Zhang Lie. We'll hand over our points!" he replied in defeat.

Zhang Lie motioned for Li Feng to step forward and to collect their wristwatches, which served as point counters. With a few quick manipulations, Team Zenith successfully obtained ten points, and the foxmen, who had lost all their points, were eliminated from the tournament.

Instead of leaving, however, Zhang Lie and the others chose to stay where they were, shrouding their surroundings in fog. Although the fight hadn't lasted very long, it had still caused a considerable commotion, one which would naturally attract competitors over. All they needed to do was to remain at the scene and wait for their prey to stop by.

As expected, not five minutes later, another team arrived at the scene. They were beast-type lifeforms, with the wristwatches hanging from a chain around their neck. Just as Zhang Lie and the

others were about to deactivate their venombane scorpion soulshards, a commotion came from behind.

It seemed to be yet another team. Zhang Lie and the others decided to lie in wait a little while longer. After all, they would easily be able to handle both teams; it was just a matter of how much effort they wanted to spend.

The team that appeared next was also composed of beast-type lifeforms; from the interaction between the two teams, it seemed as though they had already had some prior conflict.

What happened next was obvious. The two beast teams began fighting almost immediately; once the victor was decided, Zhang Lie and the others preyed on the winning team. Surprisingly, the victors had already managed to defeat yet another team, and had already obtained 22 points.

As a result, Team Zenith was at a grand total of 52 points just ten minutes or so into the tournament.

Just as the hunters were starting to feel pleased with themselves, however, the tournament leaderboard updated, and the hunters felt as though a bucket of cold water had just been upended over their heads.

Forest Quadrant—00:10

1st: Nightdemons, 256

2nd: Windthieves, 204

3rd: Magma Demons, 182

4th: Ember-of-Night, 151

5th: Night Spirits, 101

6th: Yao Ling, 81

7th: Demonic Flame, 75

8th: Spiderweave, 62

9th: MIND, 57

10th: Zenith, 52

The first-place team already had 267 points! The hunters had thought themselves lucky to have defeated three teams so early on, but they were barely in tenth place!

As their self-confidence visibly diminished, the hunters of Team Zenith quickly began to search for more prey.

Chapter 233: The Nightdemons' Bounty

Was it really possible that the nightdemons had managed to find over two hundred competitors and defeat them in the span of ten minutes? Of course not. In that case, whence came their points?

It came from those competitors who were subordinate to the nightdemons, or those who knew they wouldn't be strong enough to get a good placement and wanted to develop good relations with the nightdemons. Indeed, this was likely how the top eight teams had managed to get all their points.

After all, Earth's team was strong and lucky, and even then, they had only managed to secure fifty points or so within the first ten minutes, and that only because one of the teams they fought off had already defeated another team.

No matter how strong a given team was, even with exceptional luck, the most points it would be able to obtain from actual fighting within ten minutes was around a hundred.

After all, the forest quadrant was extremely large, and the artificial intelligence tried to evenly distribute the teams around the area so as to avoid any unfortunate clashes at the very beginning.

As a result, it was near-impossible that a team had managed to obtain two hundred points legitimately, and all those teams who had done so had managed it because they had subordinates or alliances with other clans or races.

This wasn't something that Zhang Lie could do anything about, and there was no point worrying about it.

What he was concerned about was something he had neglected before—the difference between Earth's team and the nightdemons, or any of the other top teams from around the galaxy.

Influence.

The nightdemons were strong and influential, and those teams that were unlucky enough to encounter them would either hand them their points voluntarily or resist and be killed. The choice was obvious.

The nightdemons were well known to be cruel and vicious, and the price for resistance would be too large to bear. That meant that the nightdemons, along with the other top races, would amass more and more points quickly.

They would even obtain more points than was necessary so as to be able to control just who would advance to the next round, which could very well hurt Team Zenith's chances. Zhang Lie had to win the tournament; it would determine whether or not his sister would be able to stand against. The updated leaderboard caused Zhang Lie to give up on his plans on having opponent teams come to him; he would have to seek them out instead.

On the other hand, the fact that the Earthlings were currently in tenth place shocked quite a number of top teams in the quadrant. Where the nightdemons were standing, Fu Bo murmured in displeasure, "Just how useless are the teams in this quadrant? Even the Earthlings managed to get into the top ten!"

"Well, let them be happy that they're the best of the worst. If you're that upset, why don't you have our mistress put a bounty on their heads?" one of his teammates suggested. Fu Bo's eyes gleamed as he glanced at Pu Kui, but he didn't dare speak up.

However, Pu Kui had also heard the suggestion. She nodded casually. "I am rather bored, and your suggestion isn't bad. Let's have some fun with them, shall we? Fu Bo, inform our followers from the Darkgleam star system to search for Zhang Lie and his team. If they find them, I'll guarantee them a pass for the next round!"

"Yes, Mistress!" Fu Bo saluted, smiling. "Looks like these ants won't be able to hide much longer!"

The other nightdemons laughed. However, what they didn't realize was that their actions would only be helping Zhang Lie out.

He was worried about whether he would be able to get enough points before the top teams snatched them all away; thankfully, the nightdemons were sending quite a bit his way.

As the nightdemons' announcement spread throughout the forest quadrant, the teams gathered there were all in a frenzy. The nightdemons, one of the four prime clans, would guarantee them placement in the second round!

Furthermore, this wasn't a challenging task at all. They didn't have to fight the Earthlings, only identify their location. As a result, the atmosphere in the forest quadrant seemed to shift in a strange manner.

The night spirits had also received the announcement, and they indeed sent groups out in search of Zhang Lie, but they were doing so in order to help them out, rather than to hunt them down.

After all, the Earthlings were important business partners of the night spirits, and if Zhang Lie were to die or be otherwise incapacitated, then the night spirits surely wouldn't gain access to the limit fragments that would elevate them.

Furthermore, from Ye Mo's perspective, her banquet was partially the reason for the feud between Zhang Lie and the nightdemons, so she felt some measure of guilt and shame as a result. If possible, she wanted to compensate Zhang Lie a little for his troubles.

Zhang Lie was naturally unaware of what was going on. He chalked off the fact that he was encountering more teams to mere luck.

Chu Feng, his body wrapped up in a sphere of wind, defeated yet another stubborn opponent.

"Hand over your points or die!" Chu Feng challenged his fallen opponent, who had no choice but to choose the former.

"Captain, how're my skills?" Chu Feng had started pandering to Zhang Lie after seeing how dramatically Team Zenith had improved over the last few months, hoping to get a few pointers from him.

Yun Bing was equally sharp, but she applied her talents in a different direction. "Zhang Lie, something's wrong. For some reason, the number of competitors around us has been increasing over time," she warned.

Before the Void Cup, Zhang Lie had specially asked Yun Bing and Chu Feng to bring a venombane scorpion soulshard each with them, so as to enhance their whole team's stealth abilities. They were currently traveling around in stealth and launching sneak attacks at every team they encountered.

In just ten more minutes, they had already obtained eighty points. It seemed as though the density of competitors in the region was increasing rapidly, and once they were done with each fight, two or three more teams would have appeared in the vicinity.

This was an exceptionally unusual situation. Everyone had been enjoying how easily they were obtaining points, but once Yun Bing pointed out how strange the situation was, they reacted instantly.

"Isn't it a good thing that all these hunters have gathered around us? There's no need to worry about it. We can just ask some of these hunters if we want to know more, surely."

Zhang Lie smiled as he gestured to the hunter Chu Feng had just defeated, and Yun Bing pointed at him with her blade. "Well? Why are all of you gathering around us?"

The hunter spilled the beans. "Don't kill me, please! The nightdemons announced that any team who found the Earthlings would be guaranteed a spot in the second round!"

Everyone in Zhang Lie's team was shocked.

"In that case, they must intend to fight us," Fang Yi murmured, then continued angrily, "Well, Captain? Should we wait for them to come, then take them on right here?"

Everyone turned toward Zhang Lie, infuriated that the nightdemons would cause them so much trouble, but Zhang Lie didn't seem at all angry.

"Interesting. What's there to be angry about? Weren't we concerned that we were gathering points too slowly? Look at how nice the nightdemons are, to give us such an advantage! We'll have to defeat the nightdemons sooner or later if we want to become the champions, and there's no rush to face them now.

"We'll continue our original strategy. Defeat all competitors we find and collect whatever points we can from them, then keep moving so they can't determine our location precisely. If the nightdemons want to chase us, let them. The sooner we can acquire the required points, the sooner we can leave the arena."

Indeed, it seemed that Zhang Lie's strategy would work. How infuriated would the nightdemons be to realize that they had just sent the Earthlings hundreds, even thousands, of points?

Zhou Ying's root network suddenly pinged.

"Captain, more hunters are coming—at least five teams' worth!"

"Retreat! Five teams will cause too large a commotion to face. Once they split up, we'll split into three groups and handle them all. Not only will we be able to muddle their scouts this way, we can also acquire points even more quickly.

"Yes, Captain!"

Zhang Lie, Yun Bing, and Chu Feng would be in one group, Fang Yi, Zhou Ying, and Li Feng in another, and Sun Mengmeng, Sun Xiaowu, and Yang Ze in the third. After separating into groups of three, they quickly vanished into the forest.

It took their pursuers little more than a minute to arrive at where Zhang Lie's last victims were located, but by that time, there was no one in sight. There were three sets of footprints leading away from the scene of the battle, so the pursuers naturally split into three groups as well.

Chapter 234: Heart of the Battle

With the pursuers split into three as well, the outcome was obvious: they lost their points to the members of Team Zenith and were eliminated from the tournament.

The disparity between the pursuers' strength and the Earthlings', which the pursuers hadn't accounted for, spelled their defeat. To many of them, the Earthlings were little more than a prize, rather than competitors in their own right.

Furthermore, communications were only active between competitors within each quadrant, so those competitors who were eliminated were unable to reveal just how strong the Earthlings were. In addition, only one team would be able to receive the nightdemons' boon, so it was only natural that even the search teams would be wary of each other.

This made Zhang Lie's point-gathering mission proceed much more smoothly, but he would only be able to keep it up for two or three more waves of pursuers. After that, based on how many points they had alone, any team would realize that these Earthlings weren't a force to be trifled with.

In less than an hour, Team Zenith had earned 379 points, putting them seventh on the leaderboard and rousing the nightdemons to anger. Not only had the competitors they sent out been unable to handle Zhang Lie and the others, they had just ended up as free points to strengthen Team Zenith!

At the very least, these competitors had managed to identify approximately where Zhang Lie and his team were. The nightdemons increased the bounty on the Earthlings, causing the pursuers to search for them even more frantically.

At the same time, Pu Kui herself joined in the search with her team.

Because this was a free-for-all, even the hunters who weren't affiliated with the nightdemons began to gather around where Team Zenith was located because of the density of hunters there. As a result, all of a sudden, Zhang Lie and the others found themselves at the center of a gathering group of hunters.

Deep within the forest, Zhang Lie and the others were having a quick meeting. Surprisingly, the hunters were excited rather than fearful.

"Captain, I think there must be around fifty teams in our vicinity!" Zhou Ying called out.

"Fifty!" Chu Feng murmured. How had the situation devolved to such an extent?

"Shall we retreat for now?" Yun Bing asked cautiously, understanding very well just what being surrounded here could mean for them. The nightdemons were known to be vicious, and there was no need to take such a risk.

"We'll certainly retreat, but this situation can also be an opportunity for us if we play our cards right," Sun Mengmeng suggested.

"Indeed, we can't retreat so easily. We definitely have something to gain here, with so many teams around us," Fang Yi added.

This would be an opportunity to collect all the points they needed to advance, given the density of teams in the area, so unless they truly felt threatened, it would be far more preferable not to retreat.

"Well, Captain? What do you propose?" Sun Xiaowu looked at Zhang Lie in excitement, not seeming to think much of the dozens of teams in the vicinity.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing were watching this sight with flabbergasted astonishment. The hunters of Team Zenith really didn't think much of these competitors; were they so strong that they thought they could handle them all?

Zhang Lie thought for a moment, then decided on a plan. "We could fight them head-on, but there's no reason to. Yun Bing and Chu Feng haven't been with us long enough to cooperate seamlessly, so there might be some accidents. Instead, let's retreat to the outer boundary and take things from there."

Zhang Lie's final decision left Chu Feng and Yun Bing's faces flushed. Were the two of them being a burden to everyone else?

"I'm sorry. What if the two of us were to drop—"

"No, no, don't take it that way—we're all a team!" Zhang Lie interrupted Yun Bing. The other hunters trusted Zhang Lie, and they wouldn't doubt his judgment. Further, as had been mentioned, fighting head-on wasn't the best strategy. Given how many hunters were gathering around the area, it was certain that a big fight was about to erupt—gathered here were teams searching for Zhang Lie, as well as teams hoping to acquire more points for themselves.

Quite a few of these teams were just barely weaker than the competitors from the four prime races, and it was evident just what sort of mess would result from the congregation of all these teams. As a result, it made sense to escape from the encirclement and to catch any stragglers by the boundary of the fight.

With Zhang Lie's guidance and protection, the hunters swiftly made it out of the encirclement, barely before the search parties organized by the nightdemons arrived.

Among them, the dark spirits and blood demon teams were on rather poor terms, having come to blows before the tournament. The tension among the teams gathered at the center of the encirclement was palpable.

As the dark spirits approached, the leader of the blood demons strode forward with a smirk on his face.

"Who's this, the trash collectors? You've heard of all the teams that the Earthlings managed to defeat, haven't you? I'm surprised you still had the courage to come! Go on, scam—unless you want to lose both your reputation and your lives!" the blood demon leader cackled.

"Oho? It seems like all you can do is talk. Don't you remember what happened the last time we clashed? Your clan had to send an elder to rescue you! Well, there won't be any elders here—if you want to embarrass yourself, go somewhere else!" the dark spirit leader retorted.

The other search parties, having found nothing of import, gathered around to watch the teams fight. With an audience around, neither team leader was willing to back down. If not for some hunters in the audience dissuading them in time, they might already have begun to fight.

After all, they were all allied with the nightdemons, and it would be ludicrous for them to start fighting and hurting their own forces while the Earthlings got away scot-free.

Of course, others in the crowd were more than happy to take this opportunity to start a conflict. Just as they were about to disperse in search of Zhang Lie once more, a thin black needle suddenly shot out from the direction of the blood demons, piercing the head of one of the members of the dark spirits, who was turning around.

"Be careful!" someone shouted, but it was too late. The member of the dark spirits who had been attacked slumped over and fell to the ground.

"Kill them all!" The leader of the dark spirits whirled around and commanded his subordinates to attack as he charged forward.

Opposite them, the leader of the blood demons stared in surprise at the sight, unable to get a word out before the leader of the dark spirits reached him. "You think I'm afraid of you?! Kill them!"

With a similar command, he charged forward with his subordinates, marking the start of the fight that would ultimately drag in all the hunters in the area. Of course, most of the hunters present, with the obvious exception of the two fighting teams, were rather clear-headed.

Many of them knew each other, and they were all in a state of precarious balance, one which was broken by the influx of teams who were there hunting for points.

It was true that the nightdemons were strong and influential, but no matter what, they wouldn't be able to dominate over the entirety of the teams in the forest quadrant. There were certainly many races who didn't fear the nightdemons one whit; as soon as they noticed that a fight had broken out, they rushed toward the scene to try to get as many points as they could, dragging the other hunters nearby down with them.

The situation spiraled out of control.

It was then that Pu Kui arrived with the nightdemons; by then, there was nothing that they could do about the massive battle that had broken out. "What happened here?!" Pu Kui exclaimed.

Chapter 235: One Lone Punch

No one around was able to answer her. Fu Bo immediately began to contact the remaining hunters left after the disastrous fight, and the answer caused him to curse. "Mistress, apparently, the fight started because the blood demons and dark spirits weren't able to curb their hostility toward each other!"

Pu Kui trembled in anger. "Unable to curb their hostility?! Are they children?! Strip them of their membership in the alliance. We don't need such fools!"

"Yes, Mistress!" Fu Bo replied, then asked, "What do we do next, Mistress?"

"What do we do? What else? Collect as many points as we can!"

"And the Earthlings?"

"Are you a hare-brained idiot? Either those hunters have either been caught up in the fight, or they're reaping the rewards of this heated battle like us. Keep patrolling—I'm sure we'll find them!"

The nightdemons strode into the remnants of the battle and began clearing out swathes of hunters at once. They were recognized as one of the four prime races, and their opponents were bruised and battered hunters who had just been in a fight. It would be trivial for the nightdemons to deal with

the fighting competitors and hence amass a large number of points, but Pu Kui couldn't be happy for long.

She had noticed how the Earthlings' points were rising as rapidly as theirs. In fact, the difference in points between the two teams seemed to be decreasing, not increasing.

In the dense forest, filled with sounds of fighting and brawling, it would be near-impossible to find Zhang Lie's party. In this instant, Pu Kui realized that she had completely lost this battle of wits against Zhang Lie.

More and more competitors joined in the fray, all hoping to get a slice of the pie; some lost their lives out of greed, but the success that others had found sucked in more and more people. In a few hours, the top teams already had over a thousand points each, and over eighty percent of the teams in the forest quadrant were gathered around the scene of the fighting.

As time passed, the free-for-all, which had lasted almost half the day, finally reached its conclusion as more and more competitors were eliminated. By that time, Zhang Lie and the others almost had enough points to advance.

"Captain, that was a sneaky move, but I can't deny how effective it was! We're already at 1500 points, and we're only 200 points away from the 1700 required to advance!"

"Right, I can't believe a single black needle could cause such a huge disturbance! We might even be the first team to make it out of the forest quadrant," Yang Ze added.

The hunters of Team Zenith were all overjoyed by their success, but just as they finished off yet another wave of fighters, a group of black competitors tromped over—the nightdemons!

As expected, the two teams had ultimately come across each other. By that time, Team Zenith had finished collecting sufficiently many points to advance, and it could retreat at any point without fear.

The nightdemons had also managed the same feat, and the only reason they had stuck around was to find Team Zenith. Unfortunately for them, by the time they succeeded, they knew that their opponents would easily be able to depart.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Well, let's pack up and thank them for helping us out so much."

The other hunters grinned. The two teams met by the base of a small hill. The auras of the ten nightdemon competitors was intense, but it wasn't something that could frighten or stress Zhang Lie and his group.

"Zhang Lie, are you aware of your crimes?"

"Ah, isn't this the young leader of the nightdemons, Pu Kui? It's a pleasure to meet you, but I must ask—what crimes have I committed?"

"Zhang Lie, I have to say that I've underestimated you, but now that I've found you, you should be aware of what's going to happen next. If you turn yourself in, I'll give you a quick death!" Pu Kui called out.

"I'm afraid I won't. Come—show me what makes you think you can command me!"

The nightdemons reared back in shock; how could Zhang Lie dare to challenge Pu Kui herself?!

"Very well! Given your courage, I'll at least leave your corpse intact!" Pu Kui shouted. Launching off against the ground, her body shot toward Zhang Lie like a bullet.

Dozens of meters away, she pulled her right arm back, and her body glowed resplendent with jade-green genetic energy. The front of her fist began sparking with green flame, and a boom sounded through the air as her fist broke the sound barrier.

Against this seemingly overwhelming blow, Zhang Lie did nothing more than punch forward with his hand, a hand unbacked by any technique other than brute strength, one that produced no sound, no fluctuation of genetic energy, nor any other unusual feature.

And yet that punch alone was sufficient to trigger Pu Kui's alarm bells.

Given her speed, however, a collision with Zhang Lie was imminent and inevitable. As the two fists met, the nightdemons saw a black figure flying toward them far more quickly than she had launched toward Zhang Lie.

"Mistress!" the nightdemons called out, preparing to catch her and gathering around in order to mitigate her momentum.

It took the nine nightdemons all their strength to catch their mistress, and even then, they left a huge furrow in the ground in their wake. This casual punch was so strong that it defied their understanding.

More frighteningly, their mistress's right arm—no, her entire body!—was still trembling.

What sort of situation was this? Was this a strength that a human could possess?

Even Zhang Lie was stupefied by his strength. That seemingly innocuous punch was actually an activation of [One Punch], which Zhang Lie had achieved some success with. That one punch boasted at least ten times his usual strength, even without proper preparation.

In other words, he would be able to kill or heavily injure any other opponent—except the nightdemons or starbeasts, whose racial strength lay in their physical body—with just one punch alone.

What Zhang Lie didn't realize was that Pu Kui was, in fact, heavily wounded. The crystalline skin on her right arm was filled with cracks, and if he had used a little more force, her arm could have exploded entirely.

"This is impossible! You—" Pu Kui's face warped with disbelief. Zhang Lie's fist had completely obliterated her pride and her understanding of the world.

What could have caused Zhang Lie to become so strong? Surely it wasn't... the limit fragments that she had derided? If that were the case, then there was no doubt that this hunter, who had pioneered the field of limit fragments, would become the king of all hunters of his generation.

"And why should it be impossible? The four prime races do have significant racial advantages, yes, but they're far too reliant on those advantages! And now, I think it's time for all of you to die."

Zhang Lie grinned, flaring his aura as the nightdemons buckled under the sudden pressure.

Against his absolute strength, the nightdemons were at a loss. When had they ever been so severely outmatched?

Fu Bo, who had instigated the enmity between the nightdemons and the humans, wanted to kill himself in shame. Pu Kui had warned him to ignore his pride, to focus on what Zhang Lie had developed, but he had made an enemy of Zhang Lie instead!

No, no, he couldn't let his mistress die for his misdeeds!

"It's all my fault!" Fu Bo shouted, stepping forward. "Mr. Zhang Lie, I'm the one to blame!" My pride, my malicious words, caused my mistress to view you as an enemy, and I beg of you to let her go. For this boon, my life will be yours."

Chapter 236: Everyone's Objective

Pu Kui glanced at Fu Bo with some amount of consternation and disbelief.

As for Zhang Lie, he didn't actually want to kill any of the nightdemons. The nightdemons were one of the four prime races of the Milky Way, as well as one of the four races that most contributed to the Milky Way's defense.

Although this young leader of a small subdivision of the race was likely insignificant in the grand scheme of things, Zhang Lie still didn't intend on slaughtering her in cold blood. Doing so would invite countless troubles.

He had just established himself on Earth, and his influence was rapidly growing there. He didn't want to cause trouble for himself in the tournament and have it spread back to Earth.

Furthermore, the young leader of the nightdemons had hardly threatened him at all; in fact, her decisions had helped Team Zenith advance to the next round more swiftly than it otherwise would have.

Even if he did want to kill her, he wouldn't do so in such a public setting. And with Fu Bo so conveniently taking on the blame for himself, Zhang Lie would go with what he said without bothering to confirm its veracity.

He raised a foot and stomped him into the ground.

"Remember this: as a member of the four prime races, you should act your part. I told you during the banquet, didn't I? Your domineering and bossy nature doesn't exhibit your strength—just your childishness! Do you understand?"

"Y-Yes!" Fu Bo replied, his mouth filled with mud, his skin lined with cracks, as he spat out two gulps of ink-green blood.

Even the nightdemons didn't dare say anything against Zhang Lie's treatment of Fu Bo. After all, Zhang Lie was far too strong for them to do anything about; even if they tried, they wouldn't be able to establish any form of effective resistance.

Fu Bo's strength was barely less than Pu Kui's, but a casual stomp from Zhang Lie had been enough to wound him quite severely.

"Since you seem to understand where you went wrong now, let's leave matters at that. Right—I do have to thank all of you for putting a bounty on us," he mocked.

"I apologize for the transgression, Mr. Zhang Lie! I was misled by my subordinate, but that doesn't excuse my behavior. After the tournament ends, I'll surely tender my deepest apologies." Pu Kui began to treat Zhang Lie like one of her elders, rather than her inferior.

"There's no need. Weren't you going to invite me to one of your banquets? Let's have it tonight, then."

"Of course—I'd be very glad to do so!"

"Good, good, you've become far more pleasant to interact with than before. As a reminder, don't rely so heavily on your racial advantages—your genes are what will matter for your growth in the long run!

"Yes, sir!"

Zhang Lie and Pu Kui seemed, all of a sudden, like good friends. They had just been fighting each other to the death; how had such a transformation occurred? Even the other competitors present, in both the human and nightdemon delegations, weren't sure.

Once both parties had settled their disputes, neither team decided to amass more points; both left the tournament grounds immediately after acquiring enough points to guarantee their advancement.

By that time, the night spirits, windthieves, and other teams that had preyed on the competitors throughout the battle had all amassed enough points to advance, and they immediately did so.

As the first round of the galactic stage came to a close, the legend of Team Zenith and Zhang Lie began to spread throughout the competitors.

Although none of the hunters outside were able to communicate with the competitors, they had seen every competitor's performance. Zhang Lie's team of hunters from Earth was undoubtedly the one that had stood out the most in the forest quadrant.

"Did you watch the competition?"

"What—you focused on the desert quadrant, not the forest?!"

"The forest quadrant? Why would I want to watch the vicious nightdemons?"

"Haha, don't you know who won the forest quadrant? It wasn't the night demons—it was the humans!"

"What? The humans? You must be joking—they've always been eliminated in the first round in recent years!"

"Don't you believe me? Watch the recording of the match for yourself!"

One of the spectators showed the other his wristwatch, which began to display a holographic recording of what had occurred.

The scene was, of course, the showdown between Zhang Lie and Pu Kui. After watching the fight in its entirety, the youth who had focused on the fighting in the desert quadrant jumped up in surprise.

"Is this for real? This Zhang Lie hunter managed to take down Pu Kui in a single blow? Wait, zoom in—are those cracks on Pu Kui's arm?! What kind of monster is he? Should we have paid closer

attention to the rumors about these so-called limit fragments from the solar system? Does this hunter, Zhang Lie, boast the strength of these limit fragments?"

The youth's mind was clouded with confusion, as was, indeed, every other spectator who had watched the spectacle. As the recording of that fight spread across the audience, Yan Long and Su Feng found themselves surrounded with people and flocked with messages.

When the two of them retreated to their hotel, the lobby quickly filled up to the brim with people. All those who had reached out to them wanted only one thing: to arrange a dinner with Zhang Lie.

After seeing the effects of these purported limit fragments for themselves, they knew they had to acquire them for the betterment of their race. Zhang Lie's dominating performance had spread the importance of limit fragments to a large fraction of the Milky Way, but this wasn't necessarily a good sign. After all, the theory of limit fragments had been pioneered and propounded by one person alone: Zhang Lie.

The more famous his theory, the greater the stress he would have to bear.

On Earth, or even in the Solar System at large, this level of stress was manageable; but they were currently at the heart of the Milky Way. Yan Long and Su Feng frowned as they glanced at each other.

"It's time to contact that person, isn't it, Yan Long?" Su Feng asked.

"That person?" Yan Long stilled. 'That person' naturally referred to the strongest authority on earth, the monarch Hong Tianqi. The next moment, however, he shook his head. "No, there's no need to contact him. He already knows about these limit fragments and our participation in the Void Cup. That means that he likely already knows what's going on."

"You mean that he's already warned the other authorities in the area about this?" Su Feng sighed in relief.

"At the very least, there's nothing that we'll have to worry about publicly. However, it's true that we're at the heart of the Milky Way, so there might be a few races who will try to get the information out of us by hook or by crook," Yan Long warned.

Indeed, with Hong Tianqi's assistance, the other races wouldn't dare do too much to them, but they might well try something in private.

Amidst their worries, a large clamor came from the lobby downstairs. Based on the noise alone, Yan Long and Su Feng both ascertained that Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith had returned, and the clamor could undoubtedly be ascribed to the media and Zhang Lie's newfound fans.

Yan Long and Su Feng tabled their discussion. They messaged Zhang Lie to head to their suite at once and discuss what to do next.

Moments later, Zhang Lie stepped into their suite. "What's going on? Why the urgency?"

"What's going on?! What else could be going on? Didn't you say that you would keep a low profile over the course of the competition?" Yan Long snarled.

Zhang Lie winced even as he smiled. "Ah, sorry, I couldn't bear it."

"What are we going to do? We haven't prepared for this at all!" Su Feng added, frowning.

Zhang Lie could sympathize with their troubles to some extent. "I really didn't do it intentionally—I just wanted to try out my new technique!"

Neither commander knew what to say. In the past, their competitors were so weak that, no matter what they did, they couldn't make a name for themselves. This time, on the other hand, their competitors were so strong that they couldn't keep a low profile.

"In that case, what do you plan to do? After the results of your match with Pu Kui, I'm sure that your theory of limit fragments will quickly spread across the Milky Way, and we'll soon become a target!"

Chapter 237: A Massive Salon

Zhang Lie shrugged. "What else can we do? This theory currently only works with humans, but I've been thinking about expanding to other races as well. Didn't the night spirits contact us three days ago?"

"You mean to use them as test subjects to expand the theory?!" Su Feng exclaimed. He had chalked off Zhang Lie's easy acceptance of cooperation as a delaying measure, but Zhang Lie really seemed poised to act on it!

Yan Long murmured thoughtfully, "That may be, but the night spirits are just an offshoot of the nightdemons. Shouldn't we aim for a more impactful target?"

"Right, at this point, it looks as though we should choose to work with one of the four prime races instead. If nothing else, they'll at least temper the stress that we'll have to face. In that case, Commanders, would you join me in attending a banquet at the Nightdemon Hotel tonight?"

Zhang Lie continued to smile, as though everything was under his control.

"The Nightdemon Hotel? Did you arrange to meet with them there?" Su Feng seemed rather shocked. "Weren't you battling to the death?"

"No, no—my opponent, Pu Kui, is hosting this banquet as an apology to me," Zhang Lie corrected.

It would have been impossible for Zhang Lie to hide the effect of these limit fragments in their entirety. Given Zhang Lie's acting skills, he might have been able to fool the crowd and the judges, but not the opponents whom he faced. After all, their opponents would surely be able to sense the discrepancy in strength between the two parties, so exposure was simply a matter of time. In that case, the timing of that exposure would be of paramount importance, and Zhang Lie had chosen one of the best possible times to do so.

The nightdemons were known to be ferocious and domineering, but they would, without fail, protect their kin. This was the philosophy that had ultimately led them to strength. For instance, although Fu Bo was prideful, petty, and arrogant besides, he had stepped forward and admitted his mistakes to save his young mistress's life.

That Zhang Lie had exposed his strength in such a manner shocked Pu Kui enough to convert him into a believer of Zhang Lie's theory, and it also laid the groundwork for future cooperation with the nightdemons.

The nightdemons would also serve as a shield against those enemy factions who were thinking of laying a hand on Zhang Lie, and things would proceed much more smoothly with their support.

"Very well. I have to admit that you've handled matters excellently!" Yan Long exclaimed.

Su Feng felt the same way. The two commanders, who had spent much of their life fending off and dealing with aliens, felt as though the hunter standing in front of them wasn't a youthful hunter in his twenties, but rather a scheming old man.

That evening, the Nightdemon Hotel shimmered with light, making it seem like a building that had been transported out of some fantastical land. Surrounding the hotel were all sorts of lifeforms from the Milky Way, looking around in anticipation of something or someone.

Cordons had already been set up around the hotel, and the Ural guards were standing at attention nearby. Those who weren't in the know might have thought that some lavish ceremony was about to take place, but in truth, they were simply awaiting Zhang Lie and his team.

"This is an impressive turnout!"

"Right? I could hardly have expected that the foremost black horse of the season would be the humans!"

Two young women from the aquatic race murmured to each other.

"Zhang Lie's simply too strong! After that one punch, I became a fan as well."

"Heh heh, if Pu Kui wasn't holding back, I don't think there's anyone that will be able to stop Zhang Lie from winning this tournament!"

"Holding back? Would someone like Pu Kui hold back? Didn't you hear about the bounty that she posted within the forest quadrant? Any other hunter would have been eliminated in that case, any hunter but Zhang Lie! Didn't you hear? The four prime races, along with most of the top hundred teams in the tournament, are sending out representatives to attend the banquet. Clearly, everyone's paying significant attention to Zhang Lie now!"

"Of course! They have no choice but to—especially after that fight with Pu Kui! What am I going to do? It's the first time that I've been so interested in a member of the opposite sex. Am I in love?"

"In love?! Don't you dare—Zhang Lie is mine!"

"No, he's mine!"

The two young aquatic women began squabbling with each other, wearing identical expressions to those of Zhang Lie's fans back on Earth.

Zhang Lie's one casual punch had won him the adulation of countless followers, and everyone outside the cordoned area was either a media reporter or one of Zhang Lie's fans. For the chance to see their idol for themselves, they had gathered outside the hotel in wait long before the banquet was slated to begin.

A loud blaring came from afar; before the crowd could react, two hovercars zoomed toward the main entrance of the hotel. One hovercar, sleek, black, and mysterious, flew like a whisper in the

air, making all who saw it gasp. This was a limited-edition, top-grade Pegasus, one so rare that it had only ever been seen, let alone ridden, by few of the top figures in Ural.

The door opened up, and Yan Long, Su Feng, the members of Team Zenith, Yun Bing, and Chu Feng walked out of the hovercar.

"Zhang Lie!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"Ah, my idol!"

"Team Zenith, chasing the zenith!"

The moment Zhang Lie walked off the car, the entire Nightdemon Hotel shook with his fans' agitated shouting. Zhang Lie turned, smiled, and waved.

The idols of this era were those hunters whose strength was recognized by one and all. In fact, some measure of fame had even become a requirement for acceptance into the foremost organizations.

Zhang Lie was a little surprised that things had developed to this extent, but he took things in stride. He made a shushing motion, causing the noise level to instantly drop by quite a few decibels.

From within the lobby of the Nightdemon Hotel, Pu Kui and Fu Bo walked out after seeing Zhang Lie's arrival.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, Commander Yan Long, Commander Su Feng, competitors and representatives of Earth, welcome," Pu Kui began formally.

"There's no need for such courtesy. Let's head inside," Zhang Lie replied, smiling.

Once they did get inside, Zhang Lie felt as though he had underestimated the impact that Pu Kui had among the nightdemons and the competitors at large. The private banquet had turned into a salon. In the grand hall, a few musicians were playing some soothing background music, and large tables in the center of the lobby were heaped with specialty food.

There had to be over a hundred races represented in the banquet, but Zhang Lie's arrival caused it all to come crashing to a halt. Everyone's gazes turned to him at once.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, I apologize for the sudden change, but even the nightdemons were unable to resist the simultaneous requests from over a hundred different races—"

Indeed, Pu Kui would have much preferred a private banquet for the nightdemons rather than a rather public salon, but she had no choice owing to the unbelievable pressure to which she succumbed.

"Don't worry, I don't mind. A banquet, a salon—they both involve eating and talking to people." From Zhang Lie's perspective, he didn't mind discussing plans for cooperation with one race or with ten.

Currently, his theory on limit fragments was suitable only for humans. In his past life, some other races had managed to develop something similar, but as a human himself, Zhang Lie hadn't paid particularly close attention to the work on other races.

If these other races wanted to participate in the research, let them. The growth of the races of the Milky Way would certainly indirectly aid Zhang Lie and Earth's own development, and he simply cared about remaining in control of the core research required for these gene fragments.

"Let us welcome Mr. Zhang Lie and the Earthling competitors with our warmest applause!" Pu Kui announced, causing the music to be drowned out in a riotous wave of applause.

"Welcome, Mr. Zhang!"

"Welcome, Team Zenith!"

All sorts of greetings reached their ears.

A waiter walked by with a number of champagne flutes, one of which Zhang Lie took. "Thank you. It's a pleasure to see all of you today. Let's share a toast to celebrate this relaxing night. A toast to you all!"

The other hunters all blinked in shock. It was almost time for the individual matches of the second round, so each of the hunters gathered here could well be a competitor. Who would want to share a toast with someone who could end up as your opponent the next day?

However, the gathered guests only paused for one brief moment before they all raised their glasses as one, so as to show Zhang Lie their courtesy. Quite a few guests couldn't believe what they were seeing—there were several races known to harbor a deep feud and bitter grudge with others in attendance, and yet they were all sharing a friendly toast!

If they weren't present at the scene themselves, they would have thought it all a dream.

Chapter 238: Plots Within Plots

The reason the races were all getting along in 'harmony' was because of Zhang Lie and the existence of limit fragments. They all wanted to learn more about these precious objects that could surpass the boundaries and restrictions of race. In light of this, feigning harmony wasn't a difficult task.

The salon officially began after Zhang Lie's arrival and toast. Zhang Lie, Yan Long, Su Feng, the members of Team Zenith, and even Yun Bing and Chu Feng would now have to face a barrage of representatives wanting to speak with them.

The hundred or so representatives had all but formed a line as they prepared to talk with Zhang Lie. Their questions were uniformly about whether or not these limit fragments could be adapted to their specific race. After speaking with a dozen such representatives, Zhang Lie decided he wasn't willing to continue in this fashion.

Standing up, he announced, "It looks like everyone's here to learn about limit fragments—in that case, to save some time and effort, let me make some things clear to all of you.

"First, I am the sole pioneer of these limit fragments. The foundational breakthrough and potions that I developed are only applicable to the human race. Second, while it's theoretically possible for most races to develop a similar breakthrough procedure and even potions, this will require a great amount of time, manpower, and wealth. Furthermore, there's always a possibility of failure.

"I've already announced the information about the foundational breakthrough in the past; if you'd like to obtain a copy of Potion #1, I'm willing to trade each bottle for a number of herbs. As for requests for cooperation, I will be working with the night spirits in the short term. I will have time

to handle three more such requests—of course, I won't be responsible for procuring research funds, herbs, and test subjects, and I'll require herbs as payment for successfully developing a complete product. As for the three races with whom I'll work, please discuss this and come up with an agreement among yourselves."

Zhang Lie was more generous than the representatives had expected. After all, he was sharing much of the fruits of his labor, at least as it applied to humans.

Their focus naturally shifted from him to the representatives of the other races, with whom they would be competing for Zhang Lie's three slots for research and development. In other words, three races would gain priority access to these limit fragments.

In truth, most of the races knew that they wouldn't be able to compete with the four prime races for this opportunity. All four prime races were present, and the fact that only three spots were available meant that one of the four prime races would lose out.

As a result, the representatives changed their objective. They asked about the herbs that they would need to exchange for a bottle of Potion #1, a query that Zhang Lie had been prepared for. He handed a list of herbs to all those representatives who asked about it, one in which each herb was described pictorially in great detail.

Yan Long and Su Feng viewed these proceedings with some amazement. They had to admire how carefully Zhang Lie had planned everything out. By announcing that he would work together with three other races, he had all but guaranteed that the Earthlings wouldn't be targeted until the end of the competition, because they would all want to get into Zhang Lie's good books for his help with their research.

Next, by being willing to trade bottles of Potion #1 for herbs, he was providing an alternative for those races who knew they wouldn't be able to be the first to work with him, and signifying that he didn't plan on hiding anything. Furthermore, he would even be able to acquire quite a few rare herbs in trade.

His slyest move was to only cooperate with three more races, forcing the four prime races to compete against each other. Even Yan Long and Su Feng themselves didn't think that they could have done any better.

The crowd finally stopped badgering Zhang Lie and began to feast in earnest, until Hong Yu showed up with Ali. Hong Yu and Ali were the two closest confidantes of Phoenix, from the winged clan. The reason they had appeared in front of Zhang Lie was in hopes of repairing the bad impression that they had left on Zhang Lie.

Hong Yu knew very well just what these limit fragments would represent for her race.

The fact that only three among the four prime races could get Zhang Lie's help meant that they were very likely to reach a breakthrough before anyone else, and the relative strength of the four races, which was more or less equal, could very well destabilize as a result.

None among the four races wanted to be the outcast; that was why Hong Yu had dragged Ali over with her.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, I'd like to apologize once more for Ali's aggressive behavior during our first encounter. I've brought him here specially to do so."

Hong Yu's etiquette was impeccable. She glanced at Ali, who gulped and said rather awkwardly, "I-I apologize for my earlier transgressions!"

Perhaps he wasn't truly sorry, but his actions were appropriately contrite.

"There's no need to worry, Ms. Hong Yu. I don't intend to let my own feelings color the decision the races make. Don't you think the nightdemons' young leader, Pu Kui, has transgressed even more harshly?"

Zhang Lie tipped his flute of champagne at Hong Yu and then drained it all, signifying that bygones would be bygones. He stepped past them and toward a heaping table of food.

"Thank you, Mr. Zhang Lie!" Hong Yu bowed in perfect Chinese style, causing Zhang Lie, still looking at her from the corner of his eye, to smile.

After the winged, the aquatic race and the stardemons also paid him their greetings. The aquatic princess was mischievous and cute, and she even offered him a one-night stand for a guaranteed partnership, but that proposal was met with an instant rejection.

A panda-like creature was the starbeasts' representative. It looked so cute and chubby that Zhang Lie barely resisted the temptation to cuddle it. Interestingly, it didn't mention anything about cooperating with Zhang Lie; instead, it wanted to have an arm-wrestling contest with him.

Zhang Lie naturally refused his request given what was supposed to be a formal occasion, but the panda did leave a striking impression on Zhang Lie.

Subsequently, the representatives of each of the hundred races came over to greet the Earthling delegation. Of course, Zhang Lie didn't meet most of these representatives individually; instead, most of them met with Yan Long, Su Feng, and the other members of Team Zenith instead.

The salon was something that the hunters, and even Yan Long and Su Feng, could boast about for the rest of their lives. After all, which Earthling had ever experienced such flattery and obeisance from the hundred strongest races of the Milky Way?

As they returned to the Nike Hotel, however, Zhang Lie found himself intercepted by two hunters: Ye Mo and Fu Bo. That they appeared together was rather curious to Zhang Lie. Ye Mo's appearance was understandable: Zhang Lie had singled out the night spirits as one of the races he would work with, so she had personally come over to thank him.

But what was Fu Bo doing here? Hadn't he just seen him during the salon? Zhang Lie motioned for everyone else to leave while he talked to the two hunters.

"What's going on, Fu Bo?"

"Captain, by my mistress' command, I'm one of your men now! Her intention is to have me follow you around at least during the Void Cup, just in case some hunter dares to attack you—"

"Do you think I'm an idiot? Who would dare attack me at this point? Tell your mistress that I can tell what she's trying to do, and I won't stand for it. If she wants to secure my cooperation, she can do so fairly, just like the other races!"

With Zhang Lie having seen through the nightdemons' ploy instantly, Fu Bo had no choice but to leave.

Zhang Lie then turned to Ye Mo, smiling serenely beside him. "And what about you, Ms. Ye Mo? What are you doing here?"

"For one, I have to thank you for singling the night spirits out as your first partner for this limit fragment project," Ye Mo replied.

"That's enough about that. I'll ask for you to return the favor soon, don't you worry," Zhang Lie countered. "What's the other thing?"

Chapter 239: Start of the Second Round

Ye Mo turned serious. "Let me explain. Three months ago, there was a coup in one of the subordinate clans of the night spirits race, the night mystics. Apparently, the reason behind it was that one of the children who was to be ritually sacrificed turned out to be of mixed human and night-spirit blood!"

"What? Mixed blood?" Zhang Lie glanced at Ye Mo, whose sharp spikes protruded from her body, and winced just thinking about it.

Ye Mo rolled her eyes at him. "Stop looking at me like that! Hear me out!"

"Ah, no, I was just wondering how they were even able to have children, or how that led to a coup..." Zhang Lie's idle curiosity left Ye Mo speechless for a moment.

"That's not the point, and I'm not aware of the specifics. What's important is that this child of mixed blood seems to have escaped to Earth, and the night mystics have requested to be transported to Ning to search for him."

Zhang Lie's eyes brightened. "He's in Ning, then?"

Ye Mo nodded. "As far as I can tell."

"In that case, you're hoping I can find that child and use him as a test subject for the night spirits' experiment?"

Ye Mo nodded again. "Yes, I think he'll be the best test subject we can possibly hope to find for this experiment. I'll handle the night mystics; after all, she'll die if she gets caught by them."

Zhang Lie frowned. "How old is the child?"

"Twelve or thirteen," Ye Mo replied.

"Do you have a description?"

"No—according to the night mystics, except for her tail, she looks no different from a regular human child, and this tail can generally be hidden within her body, as I'll demonstrate." Ye Mo's sharp, spiky tail aligned itself against her back, then vanished in a puff of smoke. Except for a tattoo-like mark on her back, there was no sign that her tail had ever been there.

"In that case, how am I supposed to find her?" Zhang Lie complained.

Ye Mo smiled. "You're from Ning, aren't you? I'm sure you can find her, but even if you can't, it's not such a big deal."

"Very well, I'll keep an eye out. Here I thought you came bearing gifts, but you've brought trouble my way instead!" Zhang Lie sighed and turned to leave.

"Please, wait!" Ye Mo strode up to him and bade him turn back. "I do have a gift for you, this night spirit pearl. It can increase the speed by which you can gather genetic energy at night, and it can save you considerable trouble while your subordinates search for the child."

"Oh? I'll accept this gift gratefully, then."

"With it around, you should be able to find the child as long as she's still in Ning. Please, I hope you'll give it your best!" Ye Mo's eyes shone. Although she had said that it didn't matter very much, she still hoped fervently that Zhang Lie would be able to find the girl, because she had a premonition that that girl would be the crux to unlocking limit fragments for the night spirits. As long as Zhang Lie could find her, it wouldn't be long until the night spirits could rise up as a race.

"Very well, I'll do my best. We both still have a competition to attend tomorrow, so I'll see you around." Zhang Lie turned around and walked off, while Ye Mo continued to thank him.

However, he had barely taken a few steps away when Ye Mo asked, unable to help herself, "Ah, Zhang Lie, are you aiming to become the champion?"

"Of course!"

Dawn in the capital of Ural was surprisingly splendid; the 'Sun' of their solar system was larger than that on Earth. It heralded the second round of the galactic stage of the Void Cup. This round would consist of five individual matches among those competitors who had managed to advance past the first round, and those who won three of those five battles would advance.

Of course, many competitors might not even be able to fight all five matches; the competition had very relaxed rules, and they might be severely wounded or killed after just the first match. Only a hundred competitors would be left standing after the second round, and each competitor would fight in an individual arena, much as had been done during the worldwide stage of the Void Cup.

By the entrance to the arenas, Yan Long and Su Feng watched as Zhang Lie and the other competitors headed inside. "Zhang Lie, I assume I won't have to remind you of anything—just don't cause too much of a ruckus. As for the rest of you, be careful. Apparently, Phoenix of the winged has at least five peak gene fragments, so if you encounter him, be ready to surrender at any moment. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Commander!"

"As for you, Yun Bing and Chu Feng, given the foundational breakthrough and Potion #1, you're likely no weaker than one of the mid-range competitors out there, so your objective will be to try to get into the top hundred. The Void Cup's prizes are extremely rewarding, and what you get from the competition could well last you a lifetime."

Everyone nodded at Yan Long's words. When they entered the arena, they could clearly sense the rising tension, as well as see how many fewer participants there were remaining. As they stepped into the tournament grounds, their names and IDs appeared on the large holographic screen before them:

#0121 Zhang Lie VS #3514 Gino

#0312 Sun Mengmeng VS #3114 Ji'er

#0445 Fang Yi VS #3121 Ghifu

#0401 Sun Xiaowu VS #2789 Spirit-o-wind

#0252 Yang Ze VS #3514 Cole

#0451 Zhou Ying VS #3718 Colin

#0452 Li Feng VS #3149 Casper

#0564 Chu Feng VS #2454 Fu'e

#0751 Yun Bing VS #5421 Fu Long

The strongest three hunters of the nine Earthling competitors were facing three nameless opponents, whereas the other six were facing relatively strong competitors from the windthieves and the magma demons.

The four competitors from Team Zenith would likely do well, given that they had peak gene fragments, but the situation would be somewhat more challenging for Chu Feng and Yun Bing, who neither had peak gene fragments or mutated limit fragments. Even if they were to win, it would be at great cost.

"Chu Feng, Yun Bing, don't force yourselves if you can't handle it. The windthieves and magma demons are top-tier competitors, and even if you win, you likely won't be able to do well during the next four fights. If you surrender here, you can still progress by winning the remaining three matches!" Zhang Lie advised them.

"Got it, Captain! No matter the outcome of the match, I hope you'll allow me to join Team Zenith when we all return from the Void Cup!" Chu Feng replied seriously.

While Yun Bing didn't say anything, her ardent gaze alone made her intentions clear. Just like Chu Feng, when she returned to Earth, she would do whatever it took to join Team Zenith, no matter what her clan's response was.

Before the competitors could continue chatting away, their wristwatches began to beep, and they were teleported away to each their respective arenas in the next moment.

"On arena #601, Zhang Lie VS Gino. The fight begins in ten seconds!"

"Ten!"

"Nine!"

As the white, translucent membrane separating the two competitors turned more and more transparent, Zhang Lie and Gino were finally able to see each other's faces clearly. Gino looked like a statue studded with coral all over. He was over three meters tall, and while he looked more or less humanoid, he didn't seem to have ears, a nose, a mouth, or even fingers.

Just as Zhang Lie saw Gino, so did Gino see Zhang Lie. When he did so, he surrendered immediately, then cupped his hands and bowed toward Zhang Lie in unexpected Chinese style.

Zhang Lie's eye began to twitch. Were the unusual surrenders that had plagued him all throughout the worldwide stage going to happen here, too?!

From Gino's perspective, he could hardly have afforded not to surrender. Zhang Lie had managed to injure the nightdemons' young leader, Pu Kui, with nothing more than a single punch!

This was the first match; if Gino didn't surrender and got wounded badly, he would lose all chance of proceeding to the next stage. Surrendering was undoubtedly a safe, strategic choice.

In just ten seconds, Zhang Lie was announced as the victor of his arena, and he would have to wait quite some time for the next round to begin. In the meantime, however, he would be able to observe his teammates' matches.

Eight holographic screens appeared in front of Zhang Lie, showing the six members of Team Zenith, as well as Chu Feng and Yun Bing.

It was obvious that the hunters of Team Zenith, who possessed peak gene fragments, were easily able to overwhelm their opponents, and they were on the brink of winning already. On the other hand, Yun Bing and Chu Feng weren't faring very well.

Chapter 240: The Stubborn Yun Bing

Fu'e of the magma demons stomped on the ground, causing rings of flame to flare all around him. The entirety of arena #4565 seemed, at that moment, like a volcano that had just exploded.

"[Tempest Cut]!" As the rings of flame surrounded him, Chu Feng slashed at his surroundings with his two blades, then rushed forward as quickly as the wind. His empowered attack managed to break through his opponent's defensive rings of fire and allowed him to rush up to him.

Fu'e was a crocodile that was covered in magma, and he was two meters tall even in a sedentary position. In truth, after sensing how strong his opponent's fluctuations in genetic energy were, Chu Feng was ready to give up, but he didn't want to surrender before testing out the waters.

"[Windward Sword]!" As he infused both his swords with all his genetic energy, they vanished from sight, along with Chu Feng himself, leaving nothing but a gust of wind in front of Fu'e. The caress of the wind was filled with sharp blades of sword energy, chipping off the magma surrounding his body and revealing his true form.

As the blades struck his flesh, Fu'e curled up in defense.

Chu Feng's blow had been effective, but his face seemed unusually pale: this was his strongest technique, and all he had managed to do was to destroy part of his armor and give him a superficial injury!

"[Thunderflash Magma]!" Fu'e howled, the ground beneath him turning red as magma seeped into the ground. A pillar of burning-hot magma emerged by Chu Feng's feet.

"[Wings of Wind]!" Chu Feng extended his wings as he dodged, but the magma underneath him exploded in all directions. Amidst the thunderous explosion, Chu Feng wove through the obstacles and rushed to the exterior boundary of the arena.

The magma seemed to be endless; it would be difficult for him to return to the interior of the arena, let alone attack the other party. Chu Feng instantly surrendered, causing him to be sent out of the arena in a flash of white light.

"Not bad, but your opponent's defense was simply too strong!" Zhang Lie murmured.

"It is unfortunate, but this is ultimately a problem with my own strength," Chu Feng admitted. He glanced at the screens that Zhang Lie was looking at. Not including Zhang Lie, Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, and Zhou Ying had already won their respective matches, so they were all looking at the remaining competitors from Earth.

Most of them were focused on Yun Bing, who was struggling against her opponent; if not for the fact that her opponent was holding back, she would likely have lost already.

"What's going on? Why's Yun Bing trying so hard? She should just surrender!" Sun Mengmeng murmured, glancing at the trails of blood dripping down Yun Bing's snowy-white armor and causing Chu Feng to feel a sudden sense of dissonance.

Chu Feng and Yun Bing were young leaders of two of the leading clans of China, so when had they ever felt so helpless, so marginalized? Perhaps he was the only one who could really understand Yun Bing's circumstances...

"She wants to test her own limits," Chu Feng explained, his mind still in a mess.

Everyone turned to Chu Feng. The next moment, Zhang Lie shouted into his transceiver, "Yun Bing, that's enough! You've already proven yourself, so surrender and get back out here! There'll be plenty of opportunities in the future!"

"[Web of Scorching Flame]!"

"[Blade of the Mists]!" A mysterious blade, wreathed in mist, clashed against a gigantic web of flames, causing plumes of smoke to rise into the air. Yun Bing staggered back with yet another injury, but she had forced the magma spider, Fu Long, to use his full strength.

"[Formless Cloud]!" The moment the web of flames vanished, Yun Bing summoned hundreds of clones, which shot out toward the spider. Each of her clones felt like they were at full strength, with a dazzling sword in their hands. They shot straight toward Fu Long's eyes.

"[Arachnid Pyrolance]!" Fu Long called out, his twelve legs simultaneously manifesting lances of magma, which he shot into the air. The lances popped each clone they encountered as though the clones were balloons; they weren't able to withstand even a single blow.

Fu Long's legs trembled in excitement.

"An opportunity!" Zhang Lie suddenly murmured.

Indeed, almost as he spoke, a slender figure appeared right beside Fu Long, the longsword in her hand brimming with frightening energy. She touched Fu Long's thinly protected abdomen with the blade of her sword. If she were to attack him, Fu Long would be dead at worst and grievously injured at best. She called out, "Surrender, or die!"

Fu Long surrendered.

"A cloudrune crane soulshard... that was to be her trump card, but she used it in the first match!" Chu Feng mumbled to himself.

"Is that a peak-grade soulshard?" Zhang Lie asked, a little surprised. It wasn't unusual that the scions of the major clans would have peak-grade soulshards, but Zhang Lie didn't think that Yun Bing would be able to activate it. After all, past superior-grade, soulshards required particular care to acclimate to one's body before they were usable in battle.

In a flash of white light, the victorious Yun Bing appeared before the other competitors from Earth. She had overheard Zhang Lie's question, and she replied, "Yes, it's a peak-grade soulshard, part of the inheritance of the Yun clan!"

"An inherited soulshard, no wonder... I'd almost forgotten your background!" Zhang Lie handed her a potion. "Drink this, or you likely won't be able to make it to the second match."

Before the first match, Zhang Lie had emphasized that Chu Feng and Yun Bing would have a difficult time, and, indeed, Yun Bing's injuries vindicated his claim.

"Sorry, I—"

"Don't worry, it was a good fight, and you did manage to win. However, I might suggest sitting out the second match in your condition."

"Yes, I understand!"

Ultimately, whether or not she took Zhang Lie's advice was none of his business; she was a competitor in her own right, and she could do what she thought best.

At the same time, the other members of Team Zenith returned victorious, leaving the competitors from Earth with a total of eight wins and one loss. The only competitor who had lost, Chu Feng, lowered his head gravely.

After the first match would be an hour-long recuperation period before the second. As the other hunters meditated, drank potions, and applied various salves to themselves, Zhang Lie scrolled through the fights of the young leaders of the four prime races.

He was certain he would have to face them as opponents eventually, so this was a good opportunity to learn more about them. It was true that they wanted to get into his good graces, but they certainly wouldn't be willing to give up the Void Throne for that.

The first recording he watched was of Phoenix, who was fighting against an opponent from the aquatic race—if he were right, she was one of the attendants of Lianna, princess of the aquatic race. However, in just two blows, Phoenix had managed to deal her what would otherwise be a lethal blow, and she surrendered.

After observing Phoenix's match for himself, even Zhang Lie had to admit that this prideful and arrogant youth was indeed a force to be reckoned with. Phoenix was fast, so fast that even his opponent could barely keep up with him, and Lianna's attendant had lost before she could convert the arena's terrain to her advantage.

Next was Pu Kui. She faced a relatively weak opponent in her first match, and won handily without revealing any of her abilities.

Third was the panda-like creature from the starbeasts. Zhang Lie's eyes widened as he watched the footage: the panda was a paragon of lumbering strength. His opponent, just like Chu Feng's, was what seemed to be a magma tortoise, whose strength was in defense. However, one blow from the

panda was sufficient to crack the tortoise's shell, and the tortoise ultimately surrendered amidst pained howls.

The panda's blow was so strong that even the space around the arena seemed to ripple as the blow made contact.