

U. Warlord 241

Chapter 241: The Blood Demons

Finally was Lianna, princess of the aquatic race. Truthfully, her opponent was so weak that Zhang Lie couldn't glean any of her abilities either. Her opponent had been pierced by a high-pressure bullet of water, and had surrendered almost immediately afterwards.

The speed of the technique was supernaturally quick; if not for the fact that it had burst into a mist after piercing her opponent, Zhang Lie wouldn't have believed that it had actually been a water-based attack.

Of the four prime races, the competitors that stood out the most were Phoenix of the winged and the panda-like starbeast. One dominated in speed, and the other in strength. In their respective domains, they had essentially reached the pinnacle of what was possible as a first-realm hunter.

In truth, Zhang Lie really wanted to compete with the panda in terms of strength. The damage multiplier that [One Punch] provided him made him itch to test out just what his new limits were.

However, before Zhang Lie could act on his desires, the second fight was about to begin, and the nine competitors' opponents were quickly determined.

Zhang Lie VS Yao Yue

Sun Mengmeng VS Yao Chen

Fang Yi VS Lu Huiyin

Zhou Ying VS Yin Xiang

Li Feng VS Mi Kong

Sun Xiaowu VS Wu Nian

Yang Ze VS Bing Li

Yun Bing VS Chi Liu

Chu Feng VS Zhao Dongquan

The competitors were quite lucky: except for the blood demons, their opponents were uniformly from rather weak planets, and they weren't much stronger than humans to begin with. This would likely be a free win for most of the competitors.

Fortunately, Zhang Lie and Sun Mengmeng were the two hunters that would challenge their strongest opponents, the blood demons.

"We're quite lucky. Yun Bing, give this match your all—after this, you'll just need one more win!" Zhang Lie informed Yun Bing, who nodded in agreement. He was confident that the other members of Team Zenith, whom he had taught, would perform well.

Chu Feng regretted that he had lost his first match, and he was even thinking that he should have tried his hardest to win like Yun Bing. He had no intention of losing this one, and his opponent was

considerably weaker than the magma demon he had had to face during the first match, so he should have a much easier time.

They were once again teleported to their respective arenas.

"On arena #1541, Zhang Lie VS Yao Yue. The fight begins in ten seconds!"

"Ten!"

The blood demons were humanoid lifeforms with a mane of blood-red hair. Their bodies were partially beastlike; it was rumored that the strongest and most intelligent demons were the ones whose beastlike characteristics were minimal.

Zhang Lie's opponent was one such blood demon, who had no beastlike characteristics except blood-red ears and a long tail. Strapped to her back was a gigantic broadsword, and her aura was one of a seasoned warrior. Most importantly, Zhang Lie had some memory of her, because she had greeted him during the salon last night—she was the young leader of the blood demon clan, Yao Yue!

"Seven!"

"Six!"

...

"One!"

The membrane between the two hunters vanished, but neither charged forward. Instead, both of them smiled politely at each other.

"How unlucky I am—there was only a 1 in 6800 chance of having you as my opponent!" Yao Yue exclaimed.

It was true that she would likely lose this match, but at the very least, it would deepen his impression of her. That alone was worth it. After all, Zhang Lie held the key to the improvement of her entire race.

"What, am I such an unwelcome opponent? You're not going to surrender immediately, are you?" Zhang Lie chuckled bitterly, regretting that he had displayed his prowess for all to see during the first round of the galactic stage.

"Who would want to have you as their opponent? However, please don't worry. I know I'm weaker than you are, but I won't admit defeat immediately either. This is an opportunity for me to get a taste of just what these limit fragments can do for me and mine!"

Yao Yue smiled as her aura grew more and more intense. "[Totem of the Blood Moon]!"

A fog of blood permeated the entire arena, and the light grew dim. A bloody moon rose into the air, and totems materialized around the arena. The moment the totems condensed, Yao Yue's demonic energy grew immensely, and her potent aura overwhelmed the entire arena.

In terms of strength, she didn't seem any weaker than Zhang Lie, who possessed peak gene fragments.

"Come, attack me!" Zhang Lie called out, impressed by her strength. "Show me your skills!" Black fog rose all around Zhang Lie as he challenged Yao Yue.

"Naturally. Take this: [Tome of Blood: Whirling Crescent]!" Crescent blades, manifestations of genetic energy, shot toward Zhang Lie as she swung her swords down hard. Under the glow of the blood moon totems, the blades began to multiply, one into two, two into four, until there were a thousand blades rushing toward Zhang Lie.

"Good! [Fists of the Silent Sea: Soar]!" He punched forward with his right arm, causing the black genetic energy surrounding him to explode into a sleek black fish that swam toward Yao Yue's crescent blades. It absorbed every strike from the blades, shedding some mass each time, until by the time it reached Yao Yue, it had been whittled down into the size of a goldfish.

With another attack, she destroyed the fish completely, only to find that his genetic energy seemed to consist of multiple elemental attunements.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, what interesting genetic energy you have—are the multiple elemental attunements a benefit of these limit fragments as well?" Yao Yue couldn't help asking.

"No, it's simply an unusual element of my framework," Zhang Lie replied. She had been polite and well-mannered throughout their fight, and he was developing quite a good impression of her.

"I have to admit that you're superior to me in terms of framework and technique, Mr. Zhang Lie. In that case, I won't waste your time any longer!" After all, Zhang Lie had defended against her full-strength blow with just one casual fist, and it was clear that she had no hope of besting him.

She knew that the disparity between them was so large that it couldn't be corrected by some sort of secret or special technique for the duration of the fight, and Zhang Lie clearly wasn't showing his true strength just yet.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Very well. You're not weak either, Ms. Yao Yue, and I'm sure you'll become one of your planet's stars in the future."

Yao Yue smiled sincerely. "I do believe I will be in charge of the limit-fragment project for my clan once everything is in order, so I hope you'll support my endeavor."

As she had hoped for, Yao Yue left a very strong impression on Zhang Lie. After leaving him a means of communication, Yao Yue surrendered, and the two competitors departed from the stage.

By the time Zhang Lie returned to the waiting room, Fang Yi, Zhou Ying, Li Feng, Yang Ze, and Sun Xiaowu had already made it back. They were all concentrating on Sun Mengmeng, Yun Bing, and Chu Feng's fights.

Zhang Lie smiled. "Not bad—you've all finished your matches quickly!"

"Of course! Our opponents were so weak that we could hardly have taken any longer!" Yang Ze replied.

Zhang Lie then turned back to the screen in front of the hunters. Yun Bing was struggling through her match; she was gradually gaining control over the arena, but the many wounds that covered her body once more made the others feel sorry for her.

Chu Feng had battered his opponent down; he would likely win quickly.

The third match, however, was the most surprising to Zhang Lie.

Sun Mengmeng seemed to barely have an advantage over her opponent, and neither seemed to have control of the arena. How was that possible? Sun Mengmeng had peak gene fragments! Under usual circumstances, her opponent shouldn't have been able to withstand her attacks for so long.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Captain, the blood demon hunter's using some sort of secret technique, along with three different types of strengthening potions!" Fang Yi immediately answered.

"Why? Isn't it only the second match of the round?" Zhang Lie wondered, then settled in to observe the match.

Chapter 242: The Humans' Strength

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" Three arrows, brimming with purple flame, flew toward her opponent. The arena was charred black all over, and the ground was littered with Sun Mengmeng's arrows.

The blood demon Yao Chen held a paired blood-red longsword and shortsword in his hands. He moved so quickly that he seemed to shift in and out of existence, then cut each arrow in half.

Sun Mengmeng had found a worthy opponent, though one who was only keeping up with her because of the potions he had ingested.

His framework, techniques, and fighting style were all perfectly incompatible with Sun Mengmeng, who was a long-ranged attacker. He had incredible close-ranged abilities and moved so quickly that she could hardly track his movements, but she wasn't particularly worried. After all, her reserves were strong, and she had hardly used any flashy techniques since the start of the match.

On the other hand, Yao Chen was finding the match a much harder struggle. It had been over ten minutes since he activated a secret technique, and it would last only at most ten more minutes. The moment the buff from the technique expired, he would lose without a doubt.

Furthermore, he had also consumed three strengthening potions, each with a shorter duration than the last. His body was already at its limits, and the immense pain that came as a side-effect was starting to affect his concentration.

In truth, if not for the fact that he had taken a bet with one of his clanmates about being able to defeat a member of Team Zenith, he wouldn't be fighting this hard. There was no time left. He had to strike back now, before his opponent loosed any more arrows at him. Otherwise, he would lose.

"[Eightfold Soulstealing Thrust]!" Yao Chen's speed rose to its limit, and he darted right up to Sun Mengmeng's side. His two blades whirled, forming eight clones all around him. Each clone seemed to boast as much strength as his main body had; they surrounded Sun Mengmeng from all directions and charged toward her.

Sun Mengmeng seemed a little flustered; although she had begun launching a technique, it didn't seem as though she would have enough time to do so. Furthermore, she only had three arrows, whereas her opponent had eight clones. It seemed as though the outcome of the battle was obvious.

The blood demon competitors, resting in their waiting room, began to cheer in anticipation.

On the other hand, by the Earthlings' waiting room, Zhang Lie smiled. "The match is over."

The eight clones were no more than three meters away from Sun Mengmeng when she suddenly reacted, dematerializing her longbow and replacing it with a set of crescent-bladed knives.

She smiled as flaming armor covered her body. "I'm not just a long-ranged attacker, you know. [Baptism of Hellfire: Full Moon]!"

Sun Mengmeng whirled her blades all around her, forcing the eight clones to retreat and flinging Yao Chen's body into the air. He spat out a mouthful of fresh blood as three arrows pierced his body, pinning him to the ground.

Fortunately, Sun Mengmeng had no intention of killing him, so her arrows hadn't landed anywhere particularly life-threatening, but even so, Yao Chen was yelling out in pain. "I admit defeat! I surrender!"

Just what sort of hunters had come from Earth during this iteration of the Void Cup?! Not only was his opponent a skilled long-ranged attacker, she could even defend herself well in a melee!

Of course, Zhang Lie and the others didn't think much of the win. Everyone present, with the exception of Yun Bing and Chu Feng, were familiar with Sun Mengmeng's skill, but the blood demons clearly weren't.

"What a pity for Yao Chen!" one of the blood demons murmured.

"Indeed, I'm quite surprised she was able to defend against his last attack."

"Rather sly, isn't she? Humans are known for their plotting, after all!"

"This is Yao Chen's first loss in the tournament so far, isn't it? I'm sure it'll be all he thinks about for days," another demon murmured.

"You're all wrong: this wasn't a close match at all. Yao Chen was outmatched from the very beginning!" Yao Yue suddenly exclaimed, correcting the others.

At the same time, Yao Chen, who had just been patched up, was transported back, and he immediately agreed with Yao Yue's words. "Indeed, I was completely defeated by the human girl."

"What?! The humans might be unusually strong during this iteration of the Void Cup, but surely they're not that strong?" one of the blood demons called out, unable to believe this reality. After all, in the past, the blood demons had done very well for themselves during the Void Cup, and they couldn't believe that the humans had improved so much that they could easily defeat them.

"You all saw my match against the team leader of the Earthlings, Zhang Lie, didn't you?" Yao Yue asked.

Everyone nodded.

"Indeed, he seemed rather strong, but you didn't lose by much, Team Leader!"

"What? Our team leader didn't lose—she was Zhang Lie's equal in strength, and she surrendered out of courtesy!"

Two of the blood demons gave their own perspective on the fight, and the other blood demons nodded. They didn't think Yao Yue would lose out against any of the young leaders of the four prime races.

Zhang Lie wasn't weak, but he wasn't too much stronger than they were, either. All of them seemed to have forgotten how Zhang Lie had managed to crack the arm of the nightdemons' young leader,

Pu Kui, yesterday. And while they didn't understand just how overwhelmed Yao Yue was when she faced him, Yao Yue herself did.

"You're all wrong. Let me be clear: I am no match for Zhang Lie! His skills eclipse me by so much that there would be nothing I could do to him in a serious battle. Do you understand?" Yao Yue's firm words shocked the blood demons, who were still somewhat unable to believe her.

The defeated Yao Chen added, "I think our team leader is right. That was how I felt when facing my opponent, too. They're very strong, unusually strong, stronger than any opponent I've met. It's not a feeling you'll understand until you experience it for yourself.

"The young woman I was facing hadn't used her true strength, even till the very end. In fact, if you meet any of the human competitors, I might even recommend surrendering and saving your strength."

The blood demons' waiting room turned silent.

"There's nothing to be upset about—just don't underestimate the humans. The source of their strength is in their limit fragments. If we can establish a good relationship with them, we can do the same. There are only nine Earthling competitors in the Void Cup, but the ones we really have to pay attention to are Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith. There's only a small chance that we'll encounter them, so I expect that you'll all advance without fail," Yao Yue added, seeing that everyone seemed a little dispirited.

"Yes, Team Leader!"

She and the blood demons weren't the only ones thinking about the Earthlings' explosive strength. The magma demons, who had fought quite a few of the hunters from Earth, felt much the same way.

"Fu Long, are the humans really as strong as the rumors claim?"

After watching Sun Mengmeng's fight, a magma stag cocked its head at Fu Long, who was recuperating from his wounds.

"Captain, after watching that fight, can't you tell? That archer seems to be even stronger than the opponent I faced, but not by much."

The stag nodded. "Indeed, but she's fire-attuned. If we end up having to face her, she likely won't be able to do much against us. As for the other hunters, well... if we encounter the thunder- or light-attuned hunter, I suggest we surrender immediately. Our goal is to get into the top hundred, and to do so, we only need three wins. Don't let me down!"

The magma demons and windthieves both came to the same conclusion, as did other top races. The middling and lower-ranked races naturally did the same.

On the other hand, there were those who were itching to challenge the hunters of Earth, like the prideful Phoenix of the winged.

"Hong Yu, what do you think about the Earthling competitors?"

Phoenix glanced at Hong Yu in distaste. He had just browsed the forum that had been set up for the Void Cup, only to find that most of the threads within were discussing how frightening the humans were.

Hong Yu was his most trusted companion, as well as the most logical and intelligent person he knew.

"Would you like to hear the truth?" Hong Yu asked.

"Of course!"

"In that case, it's true that the humans this year are really quite strong, even stronger than the forum makes it appear."

"Surely not?" Phoenix frowned, his distaste evident from his expression.

"Young Master, I know you're prejudiced against them, but please don't underestimate the humans. The theory of limit fragments that Zhang Lie advanced will be the future of all the races of the Milky Way. I just spoke to Yao Yue. Do you know what she thinks of Zhang Lie after their fight?"

"What did she say?" Phoenix did know Yao Yue, so he was quite interested in her opinion.

"She said that her strength was incomparable to Zhang Lie's; he was so much stronger that any comparison would be meaningless."

Phoenix fell silent.

Chapter 243: Yao Yue's Favor

Whether or not Phoenix believed Hong Yu, the strength of the humans wouldn't change as a result, and the competition wouldn't stop.

The members of Team Zenith had all won two matches in a row; after a third match, they would all make it to the top hundred. As for Yun Bing and Chu Feng, one of them had won two matches, and the other had lost one. Although their path forward would be filled with obstacles, they both had a good chance of making it as well.

By this point, the two of them had realized just how important the limit fragments they possessed were. They each had sixty basic limit fragments, which was the main reason they had managed to proceed this far into the competition.

Everyone's luck was quite good for the third match; in particular, Yun Bing and Chu Feng weren't up against strong opponents.

As a result, Yun Bing, who had suffered quite a few injuries from a protracted first and second match, gritted her teeth and continued fighting earnestly during her third match. Though she was severely wounded by the end, she managed to win, securing herself in a spot in the top hundred.

Chu Feng also won his match, suffering light injuries.

Zhang Lie and the other members of Team Zenith easily defeated their opponents. Thus, by the third match, all of Earth's competitors save Chu Feng had all managed to enter the top hundred.

Yun Bing had to be escorted away by Yan Long and Su Feng to receive treatment for her debilitating injuries, and Zhou Ying followed her out to take care of her. Everyone else remained to watch Chu Feng's fourth fight.

As Chu Feng's fourth opponent was revealed, everyone cursed near-simultaneously.

Chu Feng VS Yao Yue

Because she had lost to Zhang Lie, the young leader of the blood demons wasn't able to advance in the third match. She had ended up participating in the fourth match, and by a stroke of luck, had another Earthling as an opponent.

Thinking back to the fight she had had with Zhang Lie, Chu Feng wilted. He didn't think he would be able to compete against her at all.

"There's nothing to it. Surrender at the start of the match; you won't be able to defeat her," Zhang Lie consoled him, and Chu Feng smiled bitterly.

The fighting in the fifth match would be far more vicious than in the fourth match; everyone still fighting by then would need that win to advance. Before he could think too much about it, however, Chu Feng found himself teleported to the arena.

As the two of them glanced at each other through the diaphanous membrane, Yao Yue smiled at him in a friendly manner.

"On arena #5213, Yao Yue VS Chu Feng. The fight begins in ten seconds!"

"Ten!"

"Nine!"

"Eight!"

...

"One!"

"Let the fifth match begin!"

"I—"

"Hold on!"

Chu Feng was about to surrender when Yao Yue interrupted him. As he stared on in shock, Yao Yue called out, "I surrender!"

"What's going on? Why did she surrender?"

"I have to say, Yao Yue's a really intelligent woman!"

The crowd was of two minds in the light of her sudden surrender.

On stage, Chu Feng understood her intention near-immediately. He, and indeed all of Team Zenith, had underestimated the impact of these limit fragments. Yao Yue's objective, of course, was to get into Zhang Lie's good books, leave a deep impression on him, and have him owe her a favor.

Although he had won, Chu Feng didn't feel any joy from his unexpected victory. Indeed, if he had the choice, he would rather have surrendered and tried his best in the fifth and final match, because he had had no part in this victory. It had even caused Zhang Lie to owe Yao Yue a favor on his behalf.

The fourth match ended with everyone from Earth making their way into the top hundred competitors of the Void Cup. The aftermath of Yao Yue's surrender, however, left significant repercussions.

In the blood demons' waiting room, one of her teammates pressed her regarding her decision. "Why, Team Leader? Why did you do that? Why would you tarnish the sanctity of the Void Cup so flagrantly?"

Yao Yue only laughed. "Why? For the good of the clan, of course!"

Before the match began, Yao Yue had hardly expected that she would face another Earthling, because she knew that only one of them had yet to advance. The heavens had deemed fit to give her that opportunity, so who was she to squander it?

"For the entire clan? Team Leader, you're... trying to suck up to Zhang Lie?" another of the blood demons asked.

"Indeed! Do you doubt my judgment?" Yao Yue frowned, realizing the distaste her teammates had for her actions.

"Of course! How can we bow down to these inferior humans?" another blood demon spoke up, revulsion apparent on his face.

"I'll explain myself, but before that, let me ask you all a few questions first. Why do you think the humans of this iteration of the Void Cup have received so much attention and favorable treatment?" she questioned her teammates.

"Because of these so-called limit fragments, of course!"

"Indeed. It's precisely because of these limit fragments, because he's strong enough that the various clans have no choice but to treat him well. Even the prideful Phoenix gave him face despite being snubbed by Zhang Lie. Doesn't that tell you something about how strong Zhang Lie is?"

"The humans aren't a particularly strong race, at least in terms of their racial characteristics. In that case, given that everyone here has filled up their gene fragments to capacity, how can the humans dominate in terms of combat ability? Because of limit fragments!"

"My next question: do any of you know how to develop or obtain these limit fragments?"

How could they know? All they knew were the details that had been disseminated to the public.

"This theory was pioneered by Zhang Lie, wasn't it? Of course we wouldn't know—"

Yao Yue broke her teammate off. "Exactly. No one but Zhang Lie knows, so if we want to break through, we need to acquire Zhang Lie's assistance.

"My third question, then: Zhang Lie has designated four races for cooperation for the first attempt at developing limit fragments for those races. The four prime races will compete for the three remaining spots; what about the next batch of openings?"

"The development of these limit fragments will surely be a revolution for all the races of the Milky Way, one led by Zhang Lie, the human that you're all disdainful of! If the humans managed to grow so strong with these limit fragments, what do you think our clan, which started out stronger, will be

able to do? And so, how are we to secure Zhang Lie's cooperation? There are surely stronger and wealthier clans out there, so the only thing we can do now is to remain clear-headed, to be obeisant, to be willing to give up our pride for this opportunity.

"Perhaps you might think that my actions today spoke badly of the blood demons, but it certainly will catch Zhang Lie's attention. I intend to develop my relationship with him and secure a spot for cooperation in the second batch of openings. Is there anyone who still doubts my actions?"

The blood demons were silent. After long moments, Yao Chen mumbled, understanding her points clearly, "Team Leader, you're absolutely right. We've been too old-fashioned and prideful in our thinking."

Another blood demon, however, questioned, "But what if Zhang Lie doesn't remember this favor?"

Yao Yue almost burst out in laughter. "And why wouldn't he? The blood demons have no feud with the humans. Didn't you all see how the night spirits managed to secure cooperation with Zhang Lie from the very beginning? They did nothing more than host a banquet for him!"

Suddenly, Yao Yue's transceiver beeped. When Yao Yue glanced at the caller, her cheeks flushed in excitement.

"Team Leader, who is it?"

"Shh! Quiet, it's Zhang Lie!"

Zhang Lie! In that case, what Yao Yue had done...

"Yao Yue, thank you for your help in the fourth fight," Zhang Lie began.

"It's no issue at all. I don't expect my opponent in the fifth match to be any issue, and friends should help each other." Yao Yue clarified that she viewed the two races to be on friendly terms.

"Friends? Very well. In that case, let me promise this now: I'll guarantee the blood demons a spot in the second batch of openings."

Yao Yue's eyes widened, as did those of the blood demons in the room. Stammering, she clarified, "R-Really?"

Chapter 244: Top Hundred

Silence befell the room. Yao Yue pinched herself. "I'm not dreaming—we've really secured a spot for ourselves!"

Yao Yue's anticipation was obvious; no one knew better than her just what cooperation with Zhang Lie represented. The other blood demons began to cheer. They hadn't realized just how valuable such an opportunity was, but once Yao Yue explained everything to them, they could see that it was a precious gift indeed.

That said, Yao Yue's actions were being condemned by quite a few of the top-tier races participating in the tournament.

"Hong Yu, is this Yao Yue a friend of yours?" Phoenix asked disdainfully, a constipated expression on his face.

"We've met a few times and have exchanged a few messages. What's the matter, Young Master? Do you disagree with her actions?" Hong Yu smiled, as though she had just seen something entertaining.

"Disagree? Of course I do—she's nothing more than a bootlicker! It's disgusting!" Phoenix was utterly detested by what she did.

"Disgusting? Young Master, you should know that, because of what Yao Yue did, Zhang Lie guaranteed her clan a spot in the second batch of openings for limit fragment development. She beat out all her opponents by gracefully losing a single match. It was a smart, calculated decision, and I believe it will pay off for her clan at least a hundredfold," Hong Yu criticized Phoenix more severely than she had in years.

Phoenix stared at her dumbstruck, unable to believe that Hong Yu, one of the people he trusted most, would say such things to him. "Hong Yu, I don't understand why you're so enamored with this Zhang Lie fellow. Limit fragments this, limit fragments that— surely there's someone in the entirety of the Milky Way who can develop these fragments without the help of that odious human!

"Furthermore, these humans are no better than ants. Everything would be solved if we just kidnapped them by force; there's no need to be so polite! I was already quite upset when you brought Ali over to apologize to him, a member of an inferior third-rate race! Why the—"

"Young Master, open your eyes! It's true that, on the whole, the humans are a weak race, but their strongest hunters are hardly inferior to ours. Just look at Martial Sage Hong Tianqi! Even the winged could hardly get away without consequences if they were to rouse his ire. Don't you know that he even broke through recently?!

"I hope you'll come to your senses—this affair could very well disrupt the dominance of the four prime races. At this point, what we do now is crucial. If we continue ignoring the humans and think of them as inferior lifeforms, our actions will doom our race! Young Master, please, this is far more important than your pride!" Hong Yu urged, but Phoenix didn't care for her words.

"Get out! Scram!" His infuriated shouts drew the attention of the rest of the winged competitors.

In truth, this was the first time they had ever seen Phoenix so angry, especially to Hong Yu, who was one of his most trusted confidantes.

However, everyone was aware of his temper, and no one stepped up to defend Hong Yu.

"I will, Young Master, but please, think about what I said! Don't make enemies of the humans!"

"I said, scram!" Phoenix, seemingly having lost his senses, made as if to attack Hong Yu outright, shocking the other winged competitors.

In the end, as she sighed, Hong Yu fled from the room. Phoenix, snorting in anger, returned to his seat.

Zhang Lie! Zhang Lie! Everywhere he went, he heard this hated name.

Hong Yu had advised that he invite the other party to the winged's banquet, but Zhang Lie had snubbed him—him, the next leader of the winged!—directly, causing him to become the laughingstock of the other top races.

Even worse, that damned human even accepted the night spirits' invitation, implying that he thought of the winged as worse than a subordinate clan of the nightdemons! He couldn't take this insult lying down. If he hadn't known Hong Yu for so long, Phoenix might even have suspected that she was a spy that the humans had dispatched to him.

Phoenix swore that the humans, who had tended him such a grave insult, would surely pay for their mistake.

"From now on, if you meet a human competitor, kill them at any cost! I don't believe that such an inferior race will be able to overcome our might!" he commanded.

This command would ultimately herald the downfall of the winged. Be it because of pride or envy, Phoenix's response was overblown.

In comparison, the other races were significantly more thoughtful about what was going on. When they found out that the blood demons had secured a spot for themselves with regards to Zhang Lie's research, they were starting to wonder whether the gain would be worth it.

After all, the humans' strength was evident. They had been one of the weaker races; now, however, they were entities that even the four prime races had to be careful of offending. After seeing how much stronger the human hunters had gotten, the competitors from other races were eyeing these limit fragments with interest.

Some had even tried to research these limit fragments on their own, but it would surely progress much more slowly without an expert like Zhang Lie around. As a result, these races had no choice but to cultivate relationships with the humans. Pride was important, but so was getting a competitive advantage.

The next day, quite a few races who had disdained the blood demons for their actions became envious of their good fortune. If they had had the same opportunity, they would surely have done the same!

Thus ended the second round of the galactic stage. Every member of Team Zenith had ended up in the top hundred, a new record for mankind. The news was sent back to Earth at the speed of light, shocking the entire Solar System and causing all human hunters to cheer.

Zhang Lie, Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, Yang Ze, Sun Xiaowu, Li Feng, Yun Bing, and Chu Feng's names quickly became known throughout the solar system, especially Zhang Lie. His theory of limit fragments, Zenith Dojo, and participation in the Void Cup had left him a renowned hero and idol for just about every member of the solar system.

How long had it been since the rise of Martial Sage Hong Tianqi that Earth was afforded such honor?

In the Holy Glory Academy, in Zhang Hanxiang's suite, her suitemate, Lizi, held out her wristwatch excitedly as she flipped through the holographic images it displayed. "Hanxiang! Hanxiang! Look—your brother and his team became the top hundred competitors in the Void Cup!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, Team Zenith!"

Chants of Zhang Lie's name could be heard from outside their suite: it was apparent that Zhang Lie had quite a few fans in the Holy Glory Academy.

Zhang Hanxiang's eyes sparkled with tears. "I knew my brother could do it. He's the best!"

Beside her, Qingqing patted her back. "Hanxiang, this is a happy occasion, isn't it? Why are you crying? I'm so envious that you have such an amazing brother!"

"Right, I won't cry, I shouldn't cry! I'm just so—happy! Qingqing, Lizi, should I message my brother and congratulate him?" Zhang Hanxiang asked.

"Of course! You're his sister, aren't you? Your brother adores you so much, I'm sure he'll pick up," Qingqing murmured.

"Right, you're the most important person to him! And if you do so, we'll be able to see our idol again, too!" Lizi added.

Zhang Hanxiang called Zhang Lie on his private number, and he responded almost immediately. The familiar cadence of his voice brought her a comfort and relief she didn't know she needed.

"Hanxiang, how are you?" Zhang Lie had always prioritized Zhang Hanxiang's calls over anyone else's.

"Brother! I saw some footage of you during the Void Cup—you were amazing!"

"Haha, thank you, Hanxiang! But I've only gotten into the top hundred so far, so don't get too excited just yet. Wait until I bring the Void Throne back to Earth!"

"I understand, Brother! Your opponents had better watch out!"

Chapter 245: Chu Feng, Wounded

The two siblings talked for almost half an hour before hanging up. During that time, Qingqing and Lizi, two ardent fans of Zhang Lie, did manage to exchange a few words of greeting with him.

The topic of conversation was naturally taking care of Zhang Hanxiang, but the two girls didn't care. They would have been happy to have a conversation about anything, as long as they got to speak with Zhang Lie.

As for Zhang Hanxiang, the two girls treated her almost like a sister. In just a few short months, Zhang Hanxiang had broken out of her reticent shell and become more outgoing than before. This was the combined result of Zhang Lie's fame and the academy's teachers and students, and Zhang Lie was quite grateful to these two girls for doing so much.

The night all nine competitors from Earth made it into the top hundred of the galactic stage of the Void Cup, humans all over Earth began to cheer, but the loudest cheers came from China; in particular, from three locations in China.

One such was Ning. As the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie's hometown, the buildings stayed lit up all night long, with a frenzy of people gathered around the Zenith Dojo. That night, half the officials of Ning, and those officials of the world federation stationed at Ning, went to the Zenith Dojo to offer their congratulations.

The other cheers came, of course, from the Yun and Chu clans in the capital, who had received so many guests that night that there was a clog by their manors' front entrances. The other major clans

of the capital, along with high-ranking officials of China and the world federation, came to congratulate the heads of both clans.

They bore high hopes for Zhang Lie, along with the rest of his team, Team Zenith. However, they hadn't looked too favorably on Yun Bing and Chu Feng, who were clearly below the other seven competitors in terms of strength. Indeed, most people didn't think they would be able to get past the second stage, but thanks to Zhang Lie's assistance, they had actually been able to make it to the top hundred.

That night, the entirety of China's attention was focused on the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, the Zenith Dojo, and the Yun and Chu clans.

The third stage might be as far as Yun Bing and Chu Feng would be able to get, but for Zhang Lie and the members of Team Zenith, this was only their starting point.

The third day of the galactic stage drew near.

Before the tournament began in earnest, Zhang Lie instructed, "By this point, all hundred competitors are the cream of the crop. Everyone, use your full strength—don't be blindsided by an opponent pretending to be weak!"

He turned to Yun Bing and Chu Feng. "As for the two of you, be careful. There might be enemy factions targeting us humans, so prioritize your safety above all. If you see dangerous competitors trying to kill you outright, surrender immediately. Do you all understand?"

"Yes, Captain!"

Everyone watched the screen as the pairings for the third round were released.

Zhang Lie VS Fu Bo

Sun Mengmeng VS Yun Bing

Fang Yi VS Ali

Yang Ze VS Lianhua

Li Feng VS Feng Kun

Zhou Ying VS Fu'e

Sun Xiaowu VS Zhou Xing

Chu Feng VS Phoenix

As expected, the third stage would be vicious: the pairings were either extremely tough or somewhat laughable. Zhang Lie expected Fu Bo to surrender immediately, especially considering the thrashing that he had given him earlier in the tournament.

Sun Mengmeng and Yun Bing, on the other hand—it was unlikely that Yun Bing would have been able to advance, but to assign her to fight Sun Mengmeng felt somewhat ridiculous.

Fang Yi's opponent was Ali, Phoenix's teammate and trusted warrior. His matches in the past hadn't been particularly splashy, but given his position as Phoenix's right-hand man, his strength was all but guaranteed. The match would almost certainly be tough.

Yang Ze's opponent was even worse: Lianhua was the close companion of Lianna, princess of the aquatic. It would be tricky for Yang Ze to win this match.

Zhou Ying would likely have a hard time against Fu'e, considering her wood-attuned framework was elementally disadvantaged against Fu'e's fire-attuned one, as well as Fu'e's overwhelming defense. She would likely still be able to win, but it would be a hard match indeed.

Sun Xiaowu was lucky: his opponent, Zhou Xing, would likely be the weakest competitor that any of them had to face.

Li Feng's opponent, Feng Kun, was apparently one of the young geniuses of the windthieves, having won his three matches yesterday with effortless ease.

Chu Feng was the unluckiest of them all; he was facing Phoenix, recognized to be one of the strongest competitors of this Void Cup.

As soon as he saw the pairing, Zhang Lie told Chu Feng to surrender immediately. From his perspective, it wasn't impossible that Phoenix still bore him a grudge for rejecting his invitation, and he didn't want to risk Phoenix trying to teach Chu Feng a lesson during their match.

Chu Feng nodded gravely, and then they were all teleported to their respective arenas.

As expected, Fu Bo surrendered immediately, and Zhang Lie returned to the waiting room.

However, shockingly, Chu Feng hadn't yet returned.

Wasn't he supposed to have surrendered immediately? Had something happened?!

Zhang Lie pulled up the holographic screen showing Chu Feng's arena; the sight chilled him to his bones. Fresh blood splattered against the ground of the arena. Phoenix thrashed Chu Feng as though he were a training dummy, without any ability to resist his attacks.

Half of a tongue and a few teeth lying on the ground made it clear why Chu Feng hadn't been able to surrender: his opponent had attacked too quickly. Zhang Lie had underestimated Phoenix's grudge; after all, Hong Yu and Ali had apologized to him rather politely, but it seemed as though it were all a ruse.

He witnessed Chu Feng's left arm being ground to nothing under the scouring wind that Phoenix so finely controlled. The tremendous pain caused Chu Feng to cry out, and his cries seemed to take on a bestial quality given the loss of half his tongue.

"Ever since you pieces of trash rejected my invitation, I've been disgusted by all of you! I intended to ignore you humans entirely, but once and again, you appeared in front of my eyes, your news continuously polluting my ears and disgusting me over and over again!

"Don't you have these so-called limit fragments? Why are you still so weak? Know your place, trash!

"Let me tell you this: no matter what skills you possess, no matter what research you purport to accomplish, the humans will be no better than ants to the winged. There's a gulf between our races that you'll never overcome—you puny humans, without any racial advantages, without any source of power, without any cultivation value at all!

"Trash now, trash later—trash forever and always!"

Phoenix laughed at Chu Feng's pained cries and howls. He had disintegrated Chu Feng's left arm; next would be his right.

If Zhang Lie didn't stop Phoenix now, Chu Feng's life would be in danger. He forced himself to rein in his anger, which wouldn't solve the immediate issue ahead of him. How was he to stop Phoenix or to help Chu Feng surrender?

He contacted the artificial intelligence overseeing the matches. While he hadn't taken part in the Void Cup in his past life, he had seen matches such as this before, where the fight was artificially prolonged because of a grudge. In order to preserve the competitors' lives, team leaders were able to force a surrender for their teammates.

Explaining the situation at a rapid clip, Zhang Lie sighed in relief as, a few seconds later, the artificial intelligence announced, "Chu Feng's surrender has been initiated by his team leader, and this match will be forcibly terminated!"

Both Phoenix and Chu Feng were teleported back into their respective waiting rooms, where Yan Long, Su Feng, as well as a considerable number of medics were already waiting.

While Zhang Lie contacted the artificial intelligence, he also messaged Yan Long and Su Feng, briefly explaining the situation and requesting that they secure medical assistance immediately.

Chu Feng's left arm had vanished all the way to his shoulder, as had part of his right. There were gruesome wounds all over his body, and he had fallen into unconsciousness.

Chapter 246: Ali, Wounded

Yan Long swore at the sight, his aura causing his body to glow with heat. "Zhang Lie—"

"I know what to do, Commander Yan," Zhang Lie replied coolly. He messaged Fang Yi, who was fighting against Ali of the winged.

"Fang Yi, both of Chu Feng's arms were crippled by Phoenix, who didn't give him a chance to surrender. Let's pay him back, shall we? Cripple your opponent!"

On arena #0145, where Fang Yi was trying to probe Ali's abilities, his face suddenly darkened as he heard Zhang Lie's words. No wonder Ali had seemed so vicious! Fang Yi thought that it was just one of Ali's tactics for destabilizing his resolve, but now...

He suddenly stopped moving. Stomping his foot, lightning crackled all over the arena. Chu Feng wasn't a member of Team Zenith, but he was a representative of Earth. If Phoenix wanted to declare a war between the humans and the winged, he would have it.

Fang Yi immediately activated his stormward albatross, thunderflash mantis, and blood ant soulshards, turning him into a gigantic blood-red albatross. Scarlet lightning crackled all around him; he stood at the eye of a thunderstorm.

Ali, who was hastily retreating, found himself caught by a pair of sharp claws. The reason Fang Yi and Ali's match had dragged out so long was because of Ali's speed, but that advantage was now negated after Fang Yi's transformation.

Panicking, Ali shielded himself with his wings. His genetic energy took the form of feathers, which coalesced into a gigantic sword with which he defended himself.

The sword resisted just one blow before exploding into pieces. A bolt of lightning crashed into Ali's body, far stronger than what Fang Yi had demonstrated previously, stunning him into paralysis. With Fang Yi's strongest soulshards being activated simultaneously, he was far stronger than Ali could imagine.

As Ali's body fell to the ground, the albatross dove down, a ball of crackling red lightning gathering by its beak. It was evident that he was trying to finish Ali off while he was stunned.

"[Avatar of the Winged]!" Seconds before impending death, Ali used the blood pooling by his lips to trace out a runic formation on his body. White, dazzling splendor covered his body as the albatross reached him, covering them both in a field of lightning.

"Ah—Ahhh!"

"Ali's surrender has been initiated by his team leader, and this match will be forcibly terminated!" As Ali screamed in pain, the two competitors were teleported into their respective waiting rooms.

Ali's arms, over which he had traced the runic patterns with his own blood, had turned into smoking lumps of charcoal from bearing the brunt of the red lightning, and his chest and the upper half of his body wasn't faring much better. Indeed, if not for the gradual rise and fall of his chest, the other winged competitors would have thought him dead.

"What are you waiting for? Summon the medics!" Phoenix shouted. "How did this damn ant get so strong? He had to have consumed some restricted potion!"

The other winged competitors didn't dare speak.

The medics quickly arrived and brought Ali off, causing the victorious winged competitors, just having returned from their matches, to suddenly turn fearful. Perhaps Hong Yu was right, perhaps the humans really were a force to be contended with...

However, by this point, their personal beliefs were irrelevant, because their young leader, Phoenix, had roused mankind's ire. Ali's opponent had clearly been prepared to kill him; if Phoenix hadn't arranged Ali's surrender in time, he would be dead.

Most of the winged weren't half as strong as Ali, and if even Ali couldn't defend himself in front of them, what would they be able to do? Were they to surrender immediately? Would their opponents give them that chance?

Phoenix had already forced their hand.

The third round of the galactic stage was still proceeding in earnest; other than Fang Yi, only Sun Mengmeng and Yun Bing had returned from their matches. When they learned about what the winged had done to Chu Feng, they were likewise enraged.

"Where's Chu Feng? How's he doing now?" Yun Bing, his closest friend, asked.

"Commander Yan Long just sent word that his condition has stabilized. His left arm's gone, but he did keep half his right," Zhang Lie replied, clenching his fists.

"These damned birds! I'll teach them a lesson if I encounter them during the tournament!" Sun Mengmeng cried out.

"Kill them. Make them regret ever having antagonized us," Zhang Lie replied coldly, causing both Sun Mengmeng and Yun Bing to shiver. This was the first time they had ever seen him so angry, and the same thought flitted through their heads—this would spell the end of the winged race.

"Yun Bing, go see Chu Feng. Under these circumstances, perhaps only your presence will do him some good. I'll seek revenge on his behalf, and I'll try to find a solution for his limbs."

"I will," Yun Bing nodded stiffly.

Yun Bing left, leaving Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, and Zhang Lie in the room.

"Zhang Lie, don't blame yourself too much. No one could have predicted that the winged—"

"No, we could have. I should have noticed that the relationship between our two races have never recovered; the apology at the banquet had happened only because of Hong Yu, and it didn't represent the position of the winged race as a whole. And as for the position of the winged's team leader, Phoenix... we'll watch the footage of his match together once everyone's back."

He turned his attention to the other members of Team Zenith, still struggling through their matches. Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng didn't say anything. No matter what Zhang Lie had them do, they would carry it out without fail.

The remaining competitors were all fighting a protracted fight in order to get a chance to observe their opponents' racial characteristics.

One of the reasons the alien races were so strong was because of these characteristics, which gave them advantages over regular humans. As a result, most competitors would try to draw out the match to get their opponents to show as much of their strength as they could; they might very well encounter another member of that race further into the tournament, and any additional knowledge would be to their advantage.

On arena #1870, two oceans were clashing against each other.

Lianhua of the aquatic had been incited to anger. "Human, you'll pay for your pride!" she called out, flicking her wrists. A mirror appeared underneath her feet, with countless aquatic creatures swimming agilely beneath her.

Yang Ze had seen none of these creatures before, and he suspected they were native to her home planet.

"[Reflection of the Ocean: Hundred Beasts' Offensive]!" As the mirror tilted into an upright position, the aquatic creatures within swam out toward Zhang Lie like a flood. The hundred beasts that the name of the technique promised was a drastic underestimate; there seemed to be thousands, even tens of thousands.

Since the start of the match, the human opponent she had faced had been carefully countering and neutralizing her blow. Each attack was met with an attack of equal strength. After exchanging a few blows, Lianhua discovered what her opponent was doing.

Did he think that this would work against one of the aquatic?!

"You want to see my racial advantages, don't you? Observe it carefully, then!" A thousand aquatic lifeforms surged toward Yang Ze.

Chapter 247: The Winged's Provocation

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Fade]!" Startled by the force of the attack, Yang Ze had no choice but to respond in kind.

As he circulated [Ripples of Shattered Glass], dozens of gigantic glass sharks emerged in the ocean surrounding him, swimming toward the aquatic creatures that Lianhua had summoned.

The clashes between the summoned aquatic creatures wrecked the entire arena. They seemed to be on even footing, but moments later, Yang Ze discovered that something was amiss. The opponent's creatures seemed to have grown larger after the clash, as though they had consumed some fraction of his techniques' genetic energy.

Moments later, the glass sharks began to disperse, no longer able to be sustained by the genetic energy Yang Ze had invested. On the other hand, some of Lianhua's lifeforms had almost doubled in size.

"What a frightening racial affinity—to be able to consume other people's water-attuned genetic energy! In that case..."

Yang Ze activated his superior-grade transformation-type tigershark soulshard, turning him into a magnificent shark patterned with black and orange stripes, sharp bristles protruding from all over his body.

Such was the aura that he gave off that even Lianhua, hiding within the center of her horde of beasts, was shocked. In panic, the aquatic lifeforms dispersed, and the gigantic tigershark easily made its way to Lianhua's body. Its sharp, black horn was pointed directly at Lianhua's throat; if it were to move any closer...

Lianhua knew that she was defeated. The tigershark was simply too fast! After her opponent transformed into a tigershark, the speed and strength that he had displayed went far beyond her expectations.

"I've lost," she called out in annoyance.

Yang Ze canceled his transformation immediately, then bowed. "I apologize for probing you."

Probing an opponent was very useful for obtaining information, but it could also be viewed as an insult, so after observing the aquatic race's racial affinity and easily obtaining victory afterwards, Yang Ze apologized for what he had done.

Although their match was over, Lianhua had yet to surrender officially, so neither competitor had been teleported out of the arena. Instead, they began to chat where they stood.

"It matters not," Lianhua replied stiffly. "As an opponent, your actions were reasonable, and you are indeed quite strong. But I'm quite curious—how would you rate your strength among the rest of Team Zenith?"

"Among the rest of Team Zenith? Middling, at best."

Lianhua's eyes widened fractionally in shock. After exchanging a few more words, Lianhua officially surrendered, and both parties were teleported back to their waiting rooms.

The other hunters' matches were still going strong. Sun Xiaowu had won his match against a rather weak competitor, but the remaining members of Team Zenith, Li Feng and Zhou Ying, were still fighting hard against their respective opponents.

Li Feng's opponent was the windthieves' Feng Kun, who, just like the winged, favored speed above all. After losing out in a head-on confrontation, he began to adopt delaying tactics in hopes of whittling his opponent down with many small exchanges.

Li Feng was happy with this development, because just like Yang Ze, he wanted to learn more about the windthieves' racial affinity.

"[Windthieves' Howl]!" Feng Kun, dashing through the arena, was starting to panic. As he used his longsword like a baton, the wind whirled toward Li Feng, and he shot forward so quickly it looked as though he had teleported.

Because of how fast and how long he had been moving, he had already consumed over half his genetic energy, and if he couldn't find an opportunity to strike, this would be the end of the match.

His loss would represent the defeat of the entire wingthief race, because except for him, the only windthief competitor remaining in the galactic stage was rather weak, so he had to bear the bulk of his race's hope.

As a result, he had to find an opportunity, use his so-far hidden racial affinity, and end this match.

When Li Feng deliberately left an opening for him, Feng Kun struck. Feng Kun's body stilled, then flickered as he shot toward Li Feng's chest and abdomen. So fast did he move that, if Li Feng weren't feinting, he would surely have been hit by Feng Kun's attack.

"[Dance of the Incandescent Wyrms]!" Li Feng reacted near-instantaneously. As Feng Kun shot forward, dozens of brightly colored wyrms sprung out of the ground and walled off Feng Kun's attack, but just then, something strange happened.

Feng Kun's eyes glimmered as his body dematerialized, as though he had suddenly shifted to a parallel dimension. He passed through the wyrms without interacting with them in any manner, then landed right in front of Li Feng.

His sword struck at Li Feng's chest, but he opened his eyes wide as he noticed the resistance to his attack: his strongest blow had landed on a sparkling suit of silver-scaled dragonarmor, one whose aura sent warning bells ringing in Feng Kun's head. The dazzling light caused him to rear back and shut his eyes for a moment, marking his defeat. Li Feng, at full strength, was far stronger than Feng Kun could withstand.

"So this dimensional shift is the racial affinity of the windthieves? It's far too strong!" Li Feng cried out.

Feng Kun chuckled bitterly. "No stronger than your limit fragments. The humans aren't a particularly strong race, so I'm astonished that hunters like you exist. To have such refined genetic energy and strength even as a first-realm hunter... my loss isn't a disgrace."

Feng Kun surrendered and left the stage without saying anything more, causing Li Feng to be teleported back to the waiting room and leaving Zhou Ying the only member of Team Zenith still fighting.

By then, however, Zhou Ying's match was also ending. She, who had seen the magma demons' racial affinity, was now fighting at full strength. Her summoned vines were rather meaningless against the magma demons' magma, but her superior regeneration, exquisite use of [Storm of Leaves], and genetic energy advantage, allowed her to win the battle.

As she returned to Earth's waiting room, everyone from Team Zenith cheered her.

Nevertheless, the tension in the room seemed to grow once everyone had gathered, with no one feeling the excitement of making it into the top fifty.

"First, I have to congratulate you for advancing," Zhang Lie said, though everyone noticed that something seemed to be off with his tone.

"Captain, has something happened? Everyone seems so tense..." Zhou Ying suddenly asked.

"Yes—watch this." Zhang Lie pulled up a recording of Chu Feng's fight with Phoenix.

As soon as the match started, Phoenix rushed up to Chu Feng and punched him in the mouth, preventing him from surrendering. He severed half his tongue, then, as Zhang Lie had observed, began to torture and humiliate him, disintegrating Chu Feng's arms as he mocked the human race.

The members of Team Zenith watched this display with rage and horror for their teammate.

"Captain, what should we do? Kill him during the tournament?"

"That goes without saying. What he did to Chu Feng will be repaid tenfold, I swear it!"

Chapter 248: Phoenix's Brinkmanship

What happened between the winged and the humans quickly became common knowledge to all the competitors in the galactic stage. After all, as one of the four prime races, the winged were under constant scrutiny, and the humans had risen to fame after expounding on the theory of limit fragments.

The clash between two such races naturally drew considerable attention.

Just as Zhang Lie and the others were discussing how best to deal with the winged, quite a few races were pondering the affair as well. In the nightdemon's waiting room, Pu Kui asked her team, "What are your perspectives on this clash between the humans and the winged?"

Fu Bo immediately replied, "Your Highness, we've never gotten along with the winged, so of course we'd stand with the humans. After all, they possess the key to these so-called limit fragments!"

"Right, Highness! Given what Phoenix did during the competition, the winged surely aren't going to secure Zhang Lie's cooperation, and we'll be able to work with him first!" another nightdemon added.

Indeed, Zhang Lie had stated that he would cooperate with four races in their limit fragment development. One of these four races would be the night spirits, which meant that at least one of the four prime races would be unable to secure his help until the second set of openings.

The looming enmity between the winged and the humans meant that the remaining three spots for Zhang Lie's assistance would undoubtedly go toward the nightdemons, aquatic and starbeasts. As for the winged, they would either have to kidnap Zhang Lie and forcibly acquire his help, or to develop their own research program based on whatever information was publicly available.

The choice was obvious: the remaining three prime races would surely stand with Zhang Lie.

"Indeed, there's nothing more to be said. We side with the humans. There's no need for us to interfere with the competition itself; I'm sure Zhang Lie can handle that on his own. We can, however, help protect him outside of the tournament grounds. If any external parties try to assault Zhang Lie, have our forces take care of them. Fu Bo, once today's matches are over, accompany me to visit that wounded human!"

"Yes, Highness!"

Pu Kui reacted quickly and decisively, as did Lianna of the aquatic.

The relationship between the aquatic and the winged had never been very good; apparently, before they became sapient, their species had been natural enemies of each other, and their relationship hadn't improved significantly since then.

In the aquatic race's waiting room, the aquatic competitors were all cheering happily.

"Haha, that crazy asshole's finally found his match! I'm sure he'll pay a price for his arrogance now!" Lianna smiled.

"Lianhua, you've fought against one of the humans. What do you think?"

"The human I fought was surprisingly polite, and surprisingly strong. Even ignoring our feud with the winged, the humans have limit fragments that we have to acquire at any cost."

"Ah, good! Then we'll head over to the humans' hotel together," Lianna decided.

The starbeasts did the same.

Indeed, this wasn't a decision limited to just the four prime races. The blood demons, night spirits, and all other races that wanted to secure Zhang Lie's cooperation all decided to side with the humans.

Almost immediately after the end of the competition that day, the races' representatives all rushed toward Zhang Lie's hotel, causing Chu Feng's ward to quickly become crowded.

Of course, there were other races who viewed the humans in a hostile fashion, who disdained the humans, who disdained Zhang Lie, and who disdained these so-called limit fragments for disrupting the order among these races that had existed for centuries. These races sent representatives to Phoenix of the winged.

By the Nike Hotel, outside Chu Feng's ward, various representatives from the sympathetic races were expressing their condolences and dissatisfaction with the winged. Many were doing it perfunctorily to get into Zhang Lie's good graces, but even so, he thanked them for their support.

That said, Zhang Lie viewed this as a conflict between the humans and the winged, and he had no intention of causing a conflict that would drag the other races in. As a result, he scheduled an impromptu meeting with several of the representatives from the strongest races.

"Good evening, everyone. First, let me thank you for being here today to visit one of my injured teammates, but I hope that none of your races will try to take part in the conflict between the humans and the winged."

His first words left the representatives quite confused.

"But why? Mr. Zhang Lie, there's no need to worry. The aquatic is prepared to stand against the winged!" Lianna announced, standing up.

"Indeed! Mr. Zhang Lie, the nightdemons are at your back!" Pu Kui stood up as well.

After sensing Zhang Lie's strength for herself, she knew just how strong the human delegation was. And with both the nightdemons and the aquatic speaking up, the starbeasts couldn't lag behind. They were quickly accompanied by the blood demons and night spirits, but no matter how many races promised their support, Zhang Lie didn't change his mind.

In truth, Zhang Lie simply wanted to demonstrate the humans' strength, so at least before the competition was over, he would refuse help from the allied races.

The representatives of those races eventually left. Although Zhang Lie hadn't accepted their help, they had made their positions clear, and he had recognized them.

The Sufei Hotel was likewise thrumming with visitors.

Ali's diagnosis had just been released: his two arms had been crippled and removed completely, while the genetic core in his chest was cracked and leaking. His arms and strength would never be as good as new, unless Phoenix could become the champion of the Void Cup and acquire the potent regenerative treasure that would be its prize.

Quite a few races who were antagonistic to Zhang Lie expressed their position under the guise of wishing Ali well, but strangely, Phoenix behaved much the same way as Zhang Lie. Although he recognized them and thanked them for their efforts, he refused any help, and indicated that he would settle affairs himself.

Phoenix wanted to defeat the humans and show off the true might of the winged on his own—and perhaps to subdue Zhang Lie and force the three other prime races under his sway.

Once the other representatives had left the hotel, Phoenix slunk back to his suite. What had happened to Ali that day was, undoubtedly, his fault. That said, he had already made a decision for himself, and no matter what, he wouldn't be swayed from his path. He just wished that it were him, not Ali, who had to pay the price.

"Well, Young Master? Are you finally regretting your choice?" A familiar figure appeared outside his suite—none other than Hong Yu, whom he had chased out in pique.

Hearing her provocation, Phoenix became resolute once more. All that was happening now was what had to be done to secure the winged's primacy out of all the races in the Milky Way. "Regret?"

You've followed me for three whole years, haven't you? Have you ever seen me regret a decision I've made?"

Phoenix felt a mantle of self-confidence returning to him.

"Young Master, with regards to certain problems, I believe I understand you better than you do yourself. You have seven peak gene fragments, as well as an ancestral soul of the winged harbored within your body. You intend on dominating Zhang Lie and hence to monopolize these limit fragments for yourself. Am I wrong?"

Chapter 249: Hong Yu's Persuasion

Hong Yu's words shocked Phoenix, because she had revealed that she knew his innermost secrets. How did she know everything he was planning?!

"Young Master, you think highly of yourself, but you're not very skilled at dissembling. I've been by your side for three whole years, and it's easy for me to deduce your thoughts based on a few small comments you've made recently," Hong Yu explained. Her confidence left a bad taste in Phoenix's mouth. "Did you come over just to brag about your understanding?"

"No, I'm here to remind you one last time—don't make this worse than it already is! Otherwise—" Phoenix's eyes flashed. "Impossible! Give up and back down? Do you know what Ali's condition is like?"

"I do! But have you considered that this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't chosen to attack that Earthling first? Did you know that Zhang Lie and Team Zenith not only managed to unlock the potential of limit fragments, but have also hunted down a legendary lifeform in the first realm of the dimensional world?"

"And are you aware that your rashness could well have cost the winged its position as one of the four prime races? Are you aware that you represent the entirety of the winged race, not just your particular clan?!"

"Wake up, Young Master! No one will stop you if you want to throw away your future, but please don't bring the entire race down with you!" Hong Yu shouted.

The winged were divided into three main clans based on the color of their wings: the black-winged, the white-winged, and the rainbow-winged. The strongest among the representatives of each clan would control the majority of the race's resources and lead the entire race for that generation.

Phoenix's father was the current leader of the winged, so Phoenix was considered a young master, or even a prince. Given the resources that had been concentrated on him, Phoenix was a fair bit stronger than Hong Yu, but his intelligence and ability to understand the big picture were noticeably worse.

As for Hong Yu, she was the princess of the rainbow-winged clan, and she had been forced to become one of Phoenix's attendants due to pressure from her clan. Before the Void Cup, their interests were mostly aligned, and their relationship was peaceable. Hong Yu was intelligent and tactful, and Phoenix would have been hard-pressed to find a flaw in her abilities, but what ultimately caused a rift between them were their opinions on Zhang Lie.

According to Hong Yu, under these circumstances, they certainly could not clash directly with the humans, because the humans had sole access to the theory of limit fragments. Instead of a clash, it was most important to focus on the winged's performance in the Void Cup, which was closely scrutinized by just about every intelligent lifeform in the Milky way.

Furthermore, Hong Yu didn't think that Phoenix would be able to beat Zhang Lie, anyway. Phoenix definitely wouldn't be able to take down Pu Kui with just one punch, but Zhang Lie had done it.

"Just you wait! Observe as I take down those human ants, then lead the winged down the path of hegemony!" Phoenix called out, raising his head to the skies and laughing while Hong Yu watched on in horrified fascination.

Hong Yu's final warning did nothing but to incense Phoenix further, and their conversation came to an unhappy end.

When the Solar System received news and footage of Phoenix's fight against Chu Feng, there was a huge uproar, and a torrent of messages flooded Yan Long and Su Feng's transceivers.

Almost all the messages expressed the same sentiment: that they needed to seek payback against the winged for what was done.

The next day of the Void Cup would reduce the number of remaining competitors from fifty to twenty-five. Unfortunately, none of the humans were paired up against the winged. They fought the magma demons, the blood demons, and even a member of the night spirits; the only competitor they faced from the four prime races was Lianyou of the aquatic.

Zhang Lie faced Lianyou, Sun Mengmeng faced Yao Yue, and Sun Xiaowu faced Ye Mo.

The opponents that the other hunters faced were quite a bit worse than these three.

Of the twenty-five matches happening, there were only a few that the crowds focused on—for instance, that between Zhang Lie and Lianyou, or Sun Mengmeng and Yao Yue, or those of the young leaders of the four prime races and the humans of Team Zenith.

The outcome of the match between Zhang Lie and Lianyou was obvious. Against Zhang Lie's domineering water-attuned techniques, Lianyou, who was below-average among his race's competitors, stood no fighting chance. A few seconds after the start of the match, he surrendered after being struck by Zhang Lie's [Fists of the Silent Sea].

Sun Mengmeng's fight with Yao Yue was considerably more interesting.

Arena #0056 was wreathed with purple flames and blood-colored demonic energy. Great explosions rocked the arena as two figures darted amidst smoke and fire.

Yao Yue dragged a greatsword behind her, sending it crashing down with a blast of blood-colored energy.

Sun Mengmeng drifted in and out of the smoke like a purple firebird, ethereal and mobile. As she dodged Yao Yue's attacks, she continued shooting tracking arrows in her direction, forcing Yao Yue back.

As Yao Yue swept away three of Sun Mengmeng's arrows with a wave of her sword, she called out, "Alright, warm-up's over! I have to admit you're particularly skilled at restraining your opponent's advances, but that ends now. [Totem of the Blood Moon]!"

A familiar ruddy glow saturated the entire arena as a blood-colored moon ascended, bringing Yao Yue's demonic energy to a whole new level entirely.

"I apologize, but I can't go easy on you now. If you can fend off this blow, then victory is yours. [Tome of Blood: Sign of the Demon Moon]!"

Demonic energy burst from Yao Yue's body as she swept her broadsword in an elegant arc around her, sending a crescent blade of demonic energy whirling toward Sun Mengmeng—and a piercing beam that shot out from the demon moon, tracking the advance of the blade.

Fortunately, Sun Mengmeng had been keeping her distance from her opponent, and she had gained a few precious milliseconds in which to react.

"[Lunarflame Shot]!" Her right hand, with which she drew back her bow, blurred. Countless arrows of purple flame shot out of her bow like a meteor shower, striking the demon moon and Yao Yue's crescent blade and sapping the attacks of their strength. Within moments, she had negated the brunt of the attack, and the outcome of the match seemed obvious.

In the end, amidst a dazzling meteor shower, Yao Yue's attack dissolved completely, and Yao Yue admitted defeat graciously. "I surrender. With this skill alone, you've expended more demonic energy than the entirety of my reserves—I can't believe it!"

She laughed off her defeat as though they were two friends sparring, rather than competitors at an extremely important stage of the Void Cup. Before Sun Mengmeng could reply, she had been teleported back to the humans' waiting room.

Zhang Lie, Fang Yi, Zhou Ying, Li Feng, and Yang Ze were all there waiting for her.

They were attentively watching her and Sun Xiaowu's battle. Sun Xiaowu naturally had the advantage, and it seemed that he would secure his win shortly.

"[Darkness, Descent]!" Ye Mo shouted, drowning the arena in pitch-black darkness.

It was apparent that she wanted to end this fight with a single strike, but Sun Xiaowu was wholly unperturbed by such an advance. After all, he was the main tank for Team Zenith, so even as his opponent blinded him from sight, Sun Xiaowu didn't panic. He activated [Adamantine Aegis] and his goldenhorn beetle soulshard as he waited for his opponent's blow.

"[Night Spike]!"

Sun Xiaowu felt his armor ring as Ye Mo activated a technique by his chest, but his defense held out. The attack naturally revealed Ye Mo's position, so Sun Xiaowu immediately counterattacked. "[Goldenscale Palm: Split]!"

Golden radiance lanced the darkness, which melted away like snow. As his fist hit Ye Mo, she flew into the air. The next thing she knew, her body crashed into the ground in the shape '大'.

Her genetic energy had been dispersed, and her bones creaked and rattled as she got up, but her injuries weren't serious. She knew that her opponent had held back.

His frightening defense and overwhelming strength left Ye Mo with no hope of victory.

"I apologize, I didn't control my strength properly!"

"No, it's simply that the disparity between us is too great. I don't see any conceivable means by which I can win. I surrender!"

Chapter 250: Forced to Act

With Ye Mo's surrender, the entirety of Team Zenith had made it past that day of competition with no accidents or surprises. They then continued to watch the footage from the competitors they would likely be facing in the upcoming days.

While observing the winged's footage, however, Zhang Lie was a little surprised. In comparison to Team Zenith's dominance, the winged had performed rather terribly. The six-man team entering that day's competition had dwindled to two by the end, leaving only Phoenix and Hong Yu behind.

Perhaps intentionally or otherwise, the winged competitors made a blunder during their fights that allowed their opponents to reverse the tide and win in a surprise victory.

"What's going on? Are the winged putting on a performance?" Yang Ze asked.

"Of course—what else could they do? If they don't lose now and end up facing us tomorrow, they know we very well might kill them," Fang Yi murmured, laughing.

Phoenix had commanded them to kill whatever human competitors they encountered, but Hong Yu had analyzed that their survival rate against the humans wouldn't be higher than twenty percent. In other words, they had an eighty-percent chance of ending up like Ali—or worse! They were thankful enough that none of them encountered the humans that day, but as the tournament progressed, encountering a human opponent was almost inevitable.

As a result, the only solution would be to lose on accident before they reached that point.

"I have to admit that those fellows are quite clever, but this does show that the winged aren't all united against us. If we encounter Hong Yu, don't try to kill her. Perhaps we'll be able to give the winged a small token of our appreciation, instead," Zhang Lie schemed.

Surprisingly, the humans had become the best contender for the Void Throne by this point in the match, representing seven of the twenty-five competitors still remaining, followed swiftly by the four major clans, with two representatives from the winged, six from the starbeasts, five from the aquatic, and five from the nightdemons.

None of the other top races had managed to squeeze into the top twenty-five at all.

Tomorrow would determine the top twelve competitors remaining. Following the dramatic reduction in the number of competitors, the matches would no longer be held simultaneously; instead, they would all take place sequentially on the main stage, on which the entire audience's attention would be gathered.

Of course, as the pool of competitors was reduced in size, the members of Team Zenith would be more and more likely to face each other, almost an inevitable occurrence. Having planned for this, Zhang Lie instructed everyone to try their best and to show off their strength and improvement in this period of time.

That night, the roster for the next day was released. When he saw the first matchup, Zhang Lie smiled with his teeth.

Zhang Lie VS Phoenix

The members of Team Zenith's eyes brightened as they saw that matchup, understanding that Zhang Lie would deliver payback on Chu Feng's behalf the next day. Whether or not Phoenix would remain alive by the end of that match would depend on Zhang Lie's mood. They hated that they didn't have the ability to manipulate time, to make tomorrow come sooner, to see Phoenix cowed, begging, and kneeling by Zhang Lie's feet.

The other matchups, in contrast, were far less interesting, even the fight between the two Sun siblings.

Fang Yi VS Hong Yu

Sun Mengmeng VS Sun Xiaowu

Zhou Ying VS Pu Dongcheng

Li Feng VS Lian You

Yang Ze VS Xing Hong

As they finalized their preparations for tomorrow's competition, however, Zhang Lie found a surprise visitor by his suite: Hong Yu.

"I apologize for the late-night visit, Mr. Zhang Lie," Hong Yu began respectfully.

Zhang Lie waved a hand. "No matter. Is there an urgent issue?"

Hong Yu smiled. "I'm here with regards to your match with Phoenix tomorrow, of course."

"At this point, do you think there's much to discuss? Phoenix will die. All you can do is to find a replacement for him as soon as possible!"

Hong Yu stilled. "Please, you misunderstand me. I'm here tonight to request that you at least spare his life. After all—"

"After all, the winged is one of the four prime races, and for the good of Team Zenith and all of humanity, it would be better not to cause lifelong enmity between the two races?" Zhang Lie interrupted Hong Yu before she could continue. "This discussion is over. Phoenix will die. Instead, let's discuss what happens next. After Phoenix dies, I'll announce that, as long as the white-winged remain in power, I, Zhang Lie, will never work with the winged to develop limit fragments for their species."

Hong Yu looked toward Zhang Lie in shock. If he were to do as he claimed, the winged would surely devolve into internal schism the next day. The white-winged were strong, but with Zhang

Lie's promise, the rainbow-winged and black-winged had sufficient reason to overthrow the white-winged and seize power.

"You heartless man," Hong Yu murmured, taking a few steps back in shock.

"For what Phoenix did to Chu Feng, I would see him and his clan suffer," Zhang Lie retorted grimly. "Indeed, Miss Hong Yu, you're the one who stands the most to gain from my venture. Don't you appreciate my goodwill?"

Zhang Lie whirled around and made to enter his rooms, leaving Hong Yu to walk out dispirited. A huge wave of competitors got out of the elevator and noticed her presence there, causing her mind to reel.

When Zhang Lie killed Phoenix tomorrow and announced that he wouldn't work with the white-winged, those competitors who had seen her would naturally assume her culpability in the matter, and she would have no choice but to go along with Zhang Lie's plan.

Indeed, if she were to take control instantly, she would be able to limit the impact the schism would have on the winged's overall strength, but if she were passive and allowed the situation to devolve naturally, the impact on the winged would be tremendous.

Hong Yu had no choice. She messaged her father about the information she had gleaned and prepared for the tumultuous dawn.