

U. Warlord 251

Chapter 251: A Decisive Match

What Hong Yu didn't realize was that Phoenix was watching over her each and every move.

In the Sufei Hotel, Phoenix's face was a study in madness. He had just learned that Hong Yu had headed to Zhang Lie's rooms, and that the two of them had been alone for about five minutes before she had stepped out unwillingly.

"No wonder she's been trying to persuade me not to start a conflict with Zhang Lie—he's her gigolo, there's no doubt about it!" Phoenix couldn't think of any other reason for their encounter.

If Hong Yu were to know about Phoenix's thoughts, she would likely have gotten so angry as to spit out blood.

After commanding his subordinates to continue spying on Hong Yu, Phoenix swore that he would crush Zhang Lie under his foot tomorrow, telling Hong Yu and the other lifeforms of the Milky Way who the true king of this Void Cup was.

For that purpose, he had requested the most precious spiritual pills that the winged possessed, along with several restricted potions. No matter what, he would crush Zhang Lie tomorrow at any cost.

The next day, the skies were dull and dreary, as though they were barely holding back the rain. The bad weather didn't dampen the crowd's mood; the spectators were all very excited for the day's competitions, particularly the first. Zhang Lie VS Phoenix!

In truth, many spectators believed that this match should have been the finals of the Void Cup.

"Who do you think will win, Zhang Lie or Phoenix?"

"Isn't that obvious? Phoenix, of course—he's the young leader of the winged!"

"So? Zhang Lie easily beat Pu Kui of the nightdemons. He wounded her with just one fist—and you're still backing the winged? Ridiculous!"

"He's not wrong. At the very least, my money's on Zhang Lie!"

"His victory is almost certain, in my opinion."

"What?! Can you compare the humans' racial affinity to the winged's? The humans are a weak race, there's nothing to it! Then look at the winged—they're one of the top three races when it comes to starting advantage! Do you know what this means? The winged are the elephants to the humans' ants! Pu Kui was simply careless during that first free-for-all, and I heard rumors that Zhang Lie had consumed some restricted potion that day!"

"Some potion? That doesn't explain how strong the members of Team Zenith are, and how about his match with Yao Yue?"

"Well, if their team leader can consume a potion, why not the other members of the team as well? I bet that all the humans discovered was just some potent potion! As for Yao Yue—she was clearly just doing Zhang Lie a favor!"

Such conversations were scattered throughout the stands, with neither party able to convince the other. After all, both Phoenix and Zhang Lie had a shocking number of fans, and they naturally hoped for their idol to win, to shoot for the stars, and to end up in possession of the Void Throne. As a result, even before the match had begun, there was already a sense of anticipation in the air.

There was half an hour left for final preparations before the start of the match. In the humans' waiting room, everyone, including Yan Long, Su Feng, Yun Bing, and the recovering Chu Feng were all in attendance. With the expert supervision of the medical team here on Ural, Chu Feng was recovering relatively quickly. The reason he was here today was to watch Zhang Lie's match for himself. Zhang Lie had promised to let him watch Phoenix's downfall.

"Zhang Lie, the martial sage has sent word," Yan Long informed him seriously. "You're free to act as you please."

"That being said, Zhang Lie, I hope you'll spare your opponent's life. The winged are far too strong; if you really kill him, even China's might may not be able to protect you. Do you understand?" Su Feng added.

The other members of Team Zenith didn't say anything. What Zhang Lie decided, they would follow. Yun Bing seemed to want to dissuade him as well, but she visibly hesitated and swallowed her words each time. Chu Feng still couldn't speak, but he smiled at Zhang Lie, as if trying to convey to him that there was no need to invite trouble on his behalf.

Zhang Lie only smiled. "I know what I'm doing, and I've decided to kill him. I think all of you are still underestimating Martial Sage Hong Tianqi's prowess, and even my own. After today, the winged will hardly have the time to cause trouble for me; no, they might even have to seek me out for help!"

Zhang Lie's words stunned Yan Long and Su Feng. The two of them tried to press him for more information, but Zhang Lie was as tight-lipped as ever. Instead, they turned to the other competitors and began instructing them on what to do.

As the preparation period passed, the artificial intelligence announced the start of the match.

Two figures appeared in the Void Cup's main arena, which would be used for the remainder of the competition. As the two competitors stood facing each other, each half of the arena began to morph into the terrain most advantageous for each competitor.

Zhang Lie stood in the middle of a vast, blue ocean, whereas Phoenix was surrounded by wind. The sun, ocean, and gentle breeze would otherwise have combined into a rather relaxing whole if not for the imminent battle.

Most among the winged possessed a wind-attuned framework, but Phoenix was the notable exception. His framework was from the most prized tome that the winged had to offer, [Deity of Wing and Sun], a light- and wind-attuned framework.

The environment was perfectly suited for both competitors. Phoenix was certain that it had boosted his strength by half again his maximum. Meanwhile, beneath his feet, Zhang Lie felt the inexhaustible genetic energy saturating the entire ocean, as though he were nothing more than an

ink drop on its surface. Even he was anticipating just how strong he could be with the force and majesty of the entire ocean in his wake.

Zhang Lie was dressed in a simple black robe, whereas Phoenix wore lavish gold-lined white silk brocade. Even in attire, they seemed to be direct opposites of each other.

The audience went crazy.

"Zhang Lie!"

"Phoenix!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, Team Zenith!"

"Phoenix, Prince of the Winged, King of the Skies!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, Team Zenith!"

"Phoenix, Prince of the Winged, King of the Skies!"

Even before the match officially began, the audience's shouts had reached a crescendo.

Chapter 252: Crushed by Force

"On the main arena, Zhang Lie VS Phoenix. The fight begins in ten seconds!"

The rambunctious crowd suddenly turned silent in a moment of exquisite, unparalleled coordination. Everyone watched the countdown to the match with bated breath.

As the diaphanous membrane between the two competitors vanished, two beams of genetic energy clashed against each other. Without exchanging any customary greetings at all, the match instantly began. Both parties activated their best soulshards at once.

Phoenix held a radiant greatsword, wreathed in wind-attuned genetic energy, in one hand. He was covered in chitinous armor. His pupils contracted, as though he had entered some altered state of mind.

"[Deity of Wing and Sun: Sword of Light]!" Looking like a god from the heavens, Phoenix waved his sword. Spears of light, manifesting from thin air, shot toward Zhang Lie, drowning all before them in radiance. "Die, Earthling trash!"

Even Phoenix hadn't anticipated how strong his attack would be, but he wasn't able to enjoy his newfound strength for long. The ocean began to stir; the waves crested.

"[Fists of the Silent Sea: Hundred Dragons Soaring]!" Majestic black dragons rushed out of the ocean, rending and shattering the blades of light with their claws and teeth, blanketing the arena in the dark of night. In that one technique, Zhang Lie had combined the essence of [One Punch] and [Fists of the Silent Sea].

It had been a recent development, and if not for his surroundings granting him vital power, he would hardly have been able to summon an attack of this magnitude on his own.

Phoenix was trapped within a sphere of howling black dragons.

"[Deity of Wing and Sun: Wheel of Light]!" Rays of light erupted from the black sphere in which Phoenix was enclosed, but, moments later, as the black dragons converged on his location once more, the momentary brightness vanished.

Only then did Phoenix realize just how much stronger Zhang Lie was. Before the fight, he had expected that he would be able to kill his opponent easily given the seven peak gene fragments and countless rare treasures he possessed, but his strength was hardly on the same dimension as his opponent's.

He recalled how Yao Yue had told Hong Yu that she was incomparable to him. Indeed, after exchanging blows with him, he felt much the same way. It took him several activations of [Wheel of Light] to destroy one of the black dragons; to destroy all the ones surrounding him would be impossible. At that moment, Phoenix felt as though he were a small rat, one that could be caught and eaten at any time.

No matter what, however, he couldn't just surrender in front of all these spectators—no, he had to at least defend himself against this one blow! Otherwise, how would he have the face to call himself the prince of the winged? The white-winged would lose all their reputation because of him!

With a split-second decision, Phoenix retrieved about ten different spiritual pills and restricted potions from his soulspace, cramming everything into his mouth all at once.

His genetic energy blazed, but it was still dwarfed by the hundreds of dragons surrounding him. In the time it had taken him to consume all those potions, even more dragons had taken to the air, blocking off Phoenix's movements.

"[Deity of Wing and Sun: Featherfall Cut]!" Making a final stand, Phoenix launched an X-shaped attack with his wings, a dazzling attack amidst the darkness-covered arena, though one that only managed to dispel two more dragons before it was quickly smothered.

The next moment, before Phoenix could react, dozens of dragons closed in on him, clearly signaling his defeat. Nevertheless, Phoenix calmed down. As he expected, after he lost all ability to defend against these dragons, they darted past his body without actually injuring him. They were being watched by millions of spectators, and Phoenix was certain that Zhang Lie wouldn't be so crazy as to dare to kill him on the galactic stage.

In truth, the reason that Zhang Lie hadn't allowed the dragons to attack was because he wanted to end his opponent personally.

The next moment, a ripple emerged in front of Phoenix. Before he could speak, Zhang Lie had risen up from the depths of the ocean and clutched Phoenix's throat so tightly that he couldn't make out any words.

"I heard you don't like having your opponents surrender? Me neither."

Phoenix's eyes widened in fear as a miniature black dragon appeared on Zhang Lie's palm. As Phoenix writhed, shook his head, and pleaded, Zhang Lie forced the dragon down Phoenix's throat.

Chapter 253: Defending on All Fronts

As the miniature dragon entered his body, Phoenix began to shake, then distend, then melt. His internal organs bloated, then crumpled. Phoenix made not a sound during this process, his throat still firmly in Zhang Lie's grip.

As millions of spectators watched on, he turned into a puddle of black, inky sludge.

The spectators gaped. Phoenix had... died?! Just like that? What sort of situation was this?

How did Zhang Lie have the courage to kill Phoenix right then and there?

"The first match is over. The winner: Zhang Lie!" the artificial intelligence announced, once it verified that Phoenix had indeed perished. This announcement prodded the startled crowd awake.

"Zhang Lie!"

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie, Team Zenith!"

"He's unparalleled! Who among the competitors here can stand up to him?!"

Phoenix's death would have severe ramifications, that much was clear. The other races taking part in the Void Cup, be they friends or enemies, all began to take sides after learning of the event.

In the nightdemon's waiting room, Pu Kui announced, "Fu Bo, alert our forces. Station them at the major teleportation arrays of Ural. Tell them to hold back any experts from the winged!"

Pu Kui hadn't expected that Zhang Lie would kill Phoenix outright, but Zhang Lie had clearly exceeded her expectations.

"Your Highness, are we going to defend Zhang Lie against the repercussions of Phoenix's death?" Fu Bo was visibly hesitant; after all, Phoenix was the prince of the winged, and the winged race would surely stop at nothing to avenge him.

Pu Kui smiled faintly. "So what? Are you against it?"

Fu Bo stilled. "I think we had better be careful about wading into this mess. Think about what the winged are going to do! There's no need for us—"

Pu Kui broke him off with a laugh. "Better that the winged won't give up. Otherwise, how could we enter the fray so boldly? Go on, go make plans for this. I'm going to see Zhang Lie immediately; if I'm just a bit late, the other races are going to get to him first!"

"Yes, Highness!" Fu Bo finally understood Pu Kui's wisdom and insight. Indeed, the humans wouldn't be as easy to bully as he thought. Because of the limit fragments that Zhang Lie had developed, no allied race would—or could—allow him to die. He was the key to unlocking their future!

Otherwise, Zhang Lie wouldn't have dared to melt Phoenix down so flagrantly.

In the starbeasts' waiting room, their leader, the panda-like Xing Bai, reacted instantly.

"Zhang Lie's really something. Xing Hui, have all the nine-star guards in the vicinity rush to Ural's capital, immediately."

Xing Hui blinked. "All of them? Are we going to sacrifice our forces for the humans, then?"

Xing Bai smiled. "Just a front, nothing more. I doubt the winged will end up launching an attack."

"Even if Phoenix is the one who died?" Xing Hui pressed.

"You've seen how Zhang Lie has all but taken control of the Void Cup, haven't you? With all these allied races protecting him, the winged won't be able to attack. Now, I'd better go see him myself!"

In the aquatic's waiting room, Lianna was as flabbergasted as the spectators watching the scene.

"Lianhua, inform the elders of the situation. I'm sure they'll understand why it's in our best interests to protect Zhang Lie here."

"Yes, Highness!"

Tens, then hundreds, of races made the same choices as the nightdemons, starbeasts, and the aquatic, including the night spirits and the blood demons.

On the other hand, in the winged's waiting room, tensions were high.

"Arrogant, arrogant beyond compare! How dare they—! Hong Yu, Ali, what are we waiting for? We have to exact revenge on the humans!"

"Right, we have to inform the clan immediately—no human on Ural shall be left alive!"

"No, no—the winged should declare war on the humans and exterminate all of Earth!"

None of the winged competitors understood what sort of ramifications their suggestions would bring. Ali had just regained consciousness. While his life had been preserved, he was still in an extremely weakened state, and he had no ability to control the other hunters.

As for Hong Yu, her stance had solidified the night before.

"Quiet!" She had no choice but to step forward, quelling the disturbance the other hunters were causing. "Are you fools? Who would dare attack the humans now? The three other prime races would immediately rise up in their defense. Don't you see?! They're all hoping for Zhang Lie's help with these limit fragments!"

"I've just been informed that the nightdemons' elites are already gathered by the major teleportation arrays of Ural, and I'm sure the other races' experts are going to do the same. In that case, what can these winged representatives you intend on calling upon do? If they kill Zhang Lie immediately, they'll make it much harder for the three other prime races to obtain limit fragments. Do you think those races would allow that?"

"Have you thought about why Zhang Lie dared to kill Phoenix outright? Is it because of his arrogance? No! It's because he has nothing to fear— because everything's under his control! The winged won't be able to retaliate.

"Phoenix's pride and arrogance have brought disaster to the winged, and I have always stood in opposition against his provoking the humans, because I knew clearly what the outcome would be. However—not only did he refuse to heed my warnings, he even tried to torture and kill a competitor from Earth outright!

"It was because of his folly that the situation has devolved to this extent, and what we need to do is wait—"

Despite Hong Yu's clear analysis of the matter, the frenzied hunters couldn't stand listening to her any longer. "Wait, wait, wait—how long are we supposed to wait? Our leader's dead! Are you sure you're not a traitor to the clan?!"

"Traitor or not, I can't say, but I know she paid Zhang Lie a late-night visit last night!" One of the winged revealed that he had been surveilling Hong Yu.

"No wonder..."

"She's really a traitor?!"

With this revelation, the tide had turned almost completely against Hong Yu, leaving none but a few trusted confidantes willing to believe her words.

"Traitor, this is the winged's waiting room. Can you still call yourself a member of the winged? Scram!"

"Scram, scram, scram! You're not welcome here!"

"Who dares?! My young mistress is the princess of the rainbow-winged. How dare you sully her, how dare you try to countermand her!" one of Hong Yu's aides strode forward, pressuring the hunters into submission with her aura.

As the situation evolved into a stalemate, everyone turned to the one member of the winged, still resting in bed, who had yet to speak.

Chapter 254: Visitors From Many Races

Sensing the scorching gazes from his fellow hunters, Ali forced himself to raise his head, then to murmur weakly, "Enough. Hong Yu's correct. She and I discussed whether or not to approach Zhang Lie together. During the two days in which I've been incapacitated, all I could do was think—and in the end, I have to admit that this situation was caused almost entirely by Phoenix himself. Under these circumstances, don't bother thinking of revenge. Instead, we should try to repair our relationship with the humans."

Hong Yu's words had shocked and angered the other winged competitors; Ali's words just struck them dumb. The winged were one of the four prime races of the Milky Way. Phoenix, the prince of the winged, had just been killed, but the next two most important representatives of the clan had uniformly decided to settle matters peaceably. How could this be? How did humans command such authority?

In truth, even Hong Yu was shocked by the transformation in Ali's behavior. Because of Phoenix, Hong Yu had had no chance to see Ali, and what he said about them deciding to meet with Zhang Lie was all a bald lie.

In that case, there were only two possibilities: either her clan had rallied around her and formed an alliance with the black-winged last night, then contacted Ali to have her support Hong Yu, or Ali had really come to such a conclusion after reviewing matters in his head over and over again.

Hong Yu leaned toward, and would much rather have preferred, the former. Following Ali's words, the winged competitors froze. Beneath their haze of anger, even they realized that the winged were soon to undergo a transfer of power. If the rainbow- and black-winged clans had made up their mind

to suppress this matter, they would have to take down the white-winged clan; the current ruler of the winged, Phoenix's father, certainly wouldn't allow his son's death to go unavenged.

"Was this all a ploy by the rainbow- and black-winged to seize the throne? The white-winged emperor won't forgive you, nor the white-winged clan at large." One of the winged competitors stepped forward, and his words were quickly met with approval from those loyal to the white-winged clan.

"That's right. The young prince's death has to be avenged! If the rainbow- and black-winged won't, then we'll do it by ourselves! Come, let's leave!"

Only then did the white-winged realize how outnumbered, how unsupported, they were. Of the hundred or so winged present, only some twenty-odd people left with the white-winged, a result that the leader of the white-winged separatist branch clearly hadn't anticipated. Gritting his teeth, he motioned for the motley group of hunters to leave.

Hong Yu and Ali glanced at each other, gave the remaining winged a few orders, and then dismissed everyone. Once they were alone, Hong Yu walked toward Ali. "What's going on, Ali? Did you receive orders from your clan?"

Ali smiled bitterly. "That's part of it, but I also did think matters through during my incapacitation. It's true that the humans were quite prideful at the beginning, but not overly so. In the end, it was Phoenix who brought this on himself."

Hong Yu sighed. "There's nothing we can do now. We need to stabilize and consolidate power in our clans, then try to avoid any major conflict here. If we don't stop those crazy fellows, the entire winged race might be severely sanctioned!"

Hong Yu and Ali, at least, were in agreement about that point.

Back by the arena, the crowds weren't paying attention to the remaining fights, but rather to what the winged would do given Phoenix's sudden death.

When Zhang Lie returned to the humans' waiting room, he was instantly bombarded with Yan Long and Su Feng's concerned questions, to which he replied with a smile. "Don't worry, Commanders, nothing's wrong. If I'm not mistaken, the winged don't have the time to stage an attack against me."

"Zhang Lie, are you crazy? You melted Phoenix, and you don't think the winged are going to attack?!" Yan Long shouted.

"Everything will be fine, Commander Yan. I'm well aware of what I've done, and I'm certain we won't face any repercussions. Even if the winged did dare attack, they wouldn't be able to hurt us. The three other prime races have all declared their support, as has Martial Sage Hong Tianqi."

Nevertheless, Yan Long didn't want someone like Zhang Lie to come to any harm. "As a safety precaution—"

"Please, Commander Yan, believe in me! I can handle everything—and our allies are already here, I believe." With a smile, he pointed to the door to the humans' waiting room.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, are you here? Pu Kui of the nightdemons seeks an audience!"

"Yes, please come in." Zhang Lie motioned for Yang Ze to open the door.

Pu Kui had stopped by, alone, with a bottle of wine in her hands. "I was astounded by the match, so I immediately came to pay my greetings with a bottle of good wine."

She placed it at the center of the table in the waiting room, then took a seat. "Please, everyone, have a drink. Mr. Zhang Lie, won't you introduce me to all these people?"

Zhang Lie smiled. "I'm sure you already know all the competitors. Behind me are Commanders Yan Long and Su Feng, commanders-in-chief of the Chinese capital and the city of Ning respectively."

As the two parties exchanged customary greetings, Pu Kui laid out a few glasses on the table and began pouring wine within. "This is a hometown brew, and I hope it's to your tastes."

Except for Chu Feng, who was still injured, everyone else took and downed a glass of wine

"Good wine," Zhang Lie murmured. Yan Long and Su Feng, self-styled connoisseurs, licked their lips as they glanced greedily at the bottle of wine.

Pu Kui filled their glasses again; before they could toast, however, more shouts came from outside.

"Is Mr. Zhang Lie around? Lianna from the aquatic pays her greetings!"

Chapter 255: A Sudden Banquet

Lianna was quickly invited in. Just like Pu Kui, she was alone, and she came bearing a gift. She carried a small satchel in her purse, one which emitted a pleasant fragrance as she walked into the room.

"Congratulations on your victory, Mr. Zhang Lie! Ah, I see Pu Kui's here as well! It seems like I was slightly late, after all."

"Please, Lianna, join us. I couldn't resist coming over after seeing Mr. Zhang Lie's match, and I wanted to have a drink with him."

"Oh? What a surprise—I felt the same way! Phoenix has been an annoyance to my clanmates, and I have to thank you for getting rid of him, Mr. Zhang Lie. I'm here with a few crystal lotus leaves as a token of my appreciation."

These crystal lotus leaves were potent spiritual herbs, the specialty of the aquatic race, and were particularly difficult to obtain.

"Thank you for your kindness." Upon hearing that she had brought crystal lotus leaves with her, Zhang Lie himself stepped forward to take the gift from her hands, murmuring pleasantries while doing so.

"Please, have a seat." Zhang Lie motioned for her to sit down, pouring her a glass of wine and apologizing to Pu Kui for using her gift in this manner.

"I'm afraid I don't have any food prepared save a snack, if you don't mind trying it out—moonlight wyrm jerky. Please, have a taste."

Both Pu Kui and Lianna were surprised by just what he retrieved. The moonlight wyrm was a legendary lifeform of the first realm of the dimensional world, and just about every first-realm hunter had heard of it at some point or another. There had been rumors that Zhang Lie and his team

had killed a moonlight wyrm, but the two young leaders hadn't been sure whether or not to believe the news.

As a result, they were both quite surprised to see moonlight wyrm jerky being presented to them. Although the jerky didn't look particularly extraordinary, the two of them were somehow certain of its origins the moment they laid their eyes on it.

Meanwhile, the matches were still continuing, and a member of Team Zenith would be called out onto the stage from time to time. As time passed, more and more guests entered the humans' waiting room.

Sun Mengmeng's match lasted three minutes; by the time she returned, there was one more beast and two more humanoids sitting at the table. The beast was naturally Xing Bai of the starbeasts, while the two humanoids were Ye Mo, from the night spirits, and Yao Yue, from the blood demons.

After Sun Mengmeng's match was Fang Yi's. He returned to find even more aliens at the table, though the mood was surprisingly as convivial as before.

It was then that Yan Long and Su Feng finally realized just why Zhang Lie had been so unconcerned about the ramifications of Phoenix's death.

Of the four prime races, three were seated at this table, and there were quite a few representatives from other top races gathered as well. The number of guests had steadily been increasing; it felt as though Earth had suddenly gained an incredible number of allies.

None of the guests brought up the winged, but their very presence at the table clearly signified their attitude. Indeed, as Zhang Lie had mentioned, the winged wouldn't be able to do much against an alliance of this magnitude.

In the arena, the members of Team Zenith were still dominating their respective matches. Except for the match between Sun Mengmeng and Sun Xiaowu, in which Sun Xiaowu was knocked out, the other members of Team Zenith had won against every opponent they faced with ease.

By evening, the matches were over, and the twelve strongest competitors of the Void Cup had been determined. Zhang Lie's Team Zenith had taken a jaw-dropping six of the twelve spots, and the remainder were distributed among the other three prime races: three starbeasts, one aquatic, and two nightdemons.

Surprisingly, when Hong Yu of the winged faced Fang Yi, she had chosen to surrender, causing a stir in the gathered audience. They had expected that the humans and the winged would be clawing at each other, so why would Hong Yu surrender just like that?

Did she think her opponent was just far too strong?

No, of course not—although Hong Yu likely was weaker than Fang Yi, her surrender was meant to convey a friendly attitude toward the humans, primarily because of a comment Zhang Lie had made: he had promised that, as long as the white-winged were in charge of the winged race, he would never work with the winged to develop limit fragments for their race.

In other words, if the ruling clan of the winged bore him ill will, he wouldn't be willing to work with them.

Hong Yu's surrender was therefore a calculated decision to get into Zhang Lie's good books, as well as an indication that she wouldn't treat the humans as Phoenix had. She had succeeded in her goal—her tactful surrender left Zhang Lie with a much-improved impression of her.

With the end of the day's matches came the end of Zhang Lie's makeshift banquet. After all, those guests present would still be competitors the very next day.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, the nightdemons would like to formally recognize you, your team, and the human race as a whole as allies. We'll do our best to ensure your safety, even after you've left the capital of Ural. We have troops stationed by the major teleportation arrays into the capital, and even those of power among the winged will find it difficult to gain entry," Pu Kui informed him formally.

The other representatives made similar promises. Xing Bai of the starbeasts indicated that the nine-star guards of the starbeasts were patrolling the capital and keeping an eye out for any sign of the winged, and Lianna of the aquatic added that the elders of the aquatic were in position.

Yao Yue of the blood demons and Ye Mo of the night spirits made the same promise, shocking Yan Long and Su Feng.

The two commanders thought that these representatives were all present just to try to build up a relationship with Zhang Lie; they hadn't expected that everyone would be so sincere.

Zhang Lie thanked each of them individually, assuring them that, while their offer of assistance was appreciated, it would likely not be needed.

The winged were likely in a period of tumult as the rainbow- and black-winged clans sought to overthrow the white-winged, and they might very well drop the grudge entirely by the time the transition of power was over.

The moment Yan Long and Su Feng emerged from the humans' waiting room, they could sense a few subtle auras in their surroundings, a clear sign of the protection that the other races were talking about. They stuck closer to Zhang Lie as the group of humans returned to the Nike Hotel, but just before they were at its doors, a huge fluctuation of genetic energy came from behind them, followed by a bout of cursing.

"You damned Xing Zhou! My target's that lad—why are you stopping me?!"

"Your target's that lad? Conveniently, so is mine. Do you have a problem?"

"Damn it, I'll handle him! You guys, attack! Take down that lad!"

"Haha, do you think your motley group of hunters will stand a chance against us? Those of the aquatic, those of the nightdemons, step out! Let's make these arrogant fellows have a taste of despair, shall we?"

The fighting grew more and more intense as other factions were dragged in, before the noise gradually faded away and vanished entirely. Only then did the members of Team Zenith realize just how strong the protection afforded by the other races were.

"Zhang Lie, I have to admit that you're right once again. With the strength of these protectors, the white-winged won't be able to get anywhere close to us! But are you so certain that you'll be able to help them with obtaining limit fragments for their race?" Yan Long asked.

"I never guaranteed any success, only that I would try my best," Zhang Lie corrected.

Su Feng frowned. "But how can they be so sure that you'll be able to help, then?"

"None of the three other prime races know whether I'll succeed, but they don't want to fall behind in the event that I do. In that case, all of them will have to support me, and what I bring to the table is hope, hope that they can elevate their race above all the rest—especially after we've shown them just what these limit fragments can do. If they don't work hard now, who can promise that I won't slack off when helping them?"

Chapter 256: Moral Rectitude

The remainder of the trip back to the hotel passed without incident. In fact, during the entire "ambush", Zhang Lie hadn't even seen any of the attackers; they were easily dispatched by his retinue of guards with nothing more than a few muffled curses.

How good it felt to have such dependable allies!

After returning to the hotel, Zhang Lie dove straight into the simulation chamber and began analyzing his techniques. The variant of [Fists of the Silent Sea] that he had used during his match against Phoenix, in such an energy-rich environment, had given him new insight which he itched to incorporate in greater depth.

Meanwhile, the winged were stirring. When the news of the terrible event that had taken place reached the winged, most thought it nothing more than a rumor, even when footage of the match was shared—until a white-winged guard heard the news from his family himself.

The entirety of the winged race rose up in anger, and the white-winged emperor, who had been in secluded cultivation, emerged from his chambers. After understanding what had happened, he immediately invited the other two clan heads to discuss their next steps. That meeting lasted the rest of the day, with voices arguing incessantly—their opinions diverged in a fundamental manner, one that couldn't be reconciled.

The white-winged emperor naturally wanted the winged to rise up and take down Zhang Lie and even all of Earth, and he had called this meeting in order to discuss how to obtain reliable information about these limit fragments at the same time.

However, a rift developed almost instantly. The rainbow- and black-winged clans had no intention of fighting Zhang Lie; instead, they even wanted to repair the relationship between the Earthlings and the winged. Indeed, after killing Phoenix, Zhang Lie had mentioned that he would never help the winged while the white-winged were in power.

Zhang Lie had killed Phoenix on the battlefield of the Void Cup. Death was a risk all competitors who participated in the Void Cup understood; in theory, the winged had no basis for causing trouble for Zhang Lie and seeking retribution, but the winged could hardly take this insult lying down, and they were used to being one of the strongest.

Weak as the humans were, though, there were two points that the winged were forced to keep in mind: the strength of Earth's Martial Sage Hong Tianqi, along with the theory of limit fragments that had caught the galaxy by surprise.

The winged elders, therefore, took a different stance from the white-winged emperor and the rainbow- and black-winged clan heads. They desired neither war nor reconciliation, but rather a negotiation: passing some mild punishment on Zhang Lie while discussing terms by which they could obtain information about these limit fragments with Hong Tianqi.

The three factions, at odds with one another, caused the meeting to drag on without any resolution.

The white-winged emperor became more and more angry. Thumping the table, he roared out, "Quiet, all of you! As the emperor, I hereby use my vested authority. The discussion ends now. I don't want to hear any of your opinions any longer. After dinner, we'll set off for the capital of Ural. Even if this spawns war, that human brat will die!

"As for the limit fragments, it's best if we can acquire them, but if we can't, then we'll just destroy them. No one will have an advantage the winged do not possess. Do you all understand?"

It was clear that the white-winged emperor was furious. The vested authority to which he made reference was something that could be done only once in every emperor's reign, the power of absolute veto.

However, the subsequent development of affairs wasn't as he had planned. Moments after his announcement, the elders began to whisper to one another. As one, they stood up. "The elders unanimously vote to reject imperial authority!"

Even the emperor's power could be rejected given a unanimous vote from the council of elders in the winged's system of checks and balances; even the elders that were on closest terms with the white-winged had deserted him.

The elders weren't allowed to be part of any of the three clans, but these were members of the winged he had personally mentored and elevated throughout his career. How could they desert him now?

"What's the matter? Why do this? Against a race as weak as those puny humans, why do you refuse my right to avenge my son?!"

"The rainbow-winged clan leader stood up. "Honored white-winged emperor, we believe you are mistaken: the humans aren't uniformly weak. Indeed, the existence of Martial Sage Hong Tianqi alone should deter any offensives against them.

"Furthermore, our intelligence operatives report that the starbeasts' nine-star guards, the aquatic race's elders, and the nightdemons' night wardens have all gathered by the capital of Ural. Under such circumstances, launching an attack on Zhang Lie would be futile: even with all our strength, we could hardly hope to defeat all those forces.

"In other words, we can't touch the humans. If you raise the flag of war against them, you'll doom the entirety of the winged! As the emperor, surely you don't intend to sacrifice the entire race in a misguided attempt to avenge your dead son? If you persist in making this decision, then I, on behalf of the winged, challenge you to the seat of the throne!" the rainbow-winged leader called out.

The elders nodded in agreement. Most of the elders present could see the value of these limit fragments, and as long as that card was in play, they would side with the rainbow- and black-winged.

"A royal challenge? Are you all in agreement with the rainbow-winged, then?" The white-winged emperor stood up, a ferocious, threatening look on his face, causing the elders to look upon him with dissatisfaction.

One elder stood up and strode forward. "Honored white-winged emperor, this is a sensitive period. If the winged make a wrong move now, it could spell doom for our entire race. Please, I beg you to reconsider your stance."

The emperor only scoffed. "If the council of elders refuses to recant, then the white-winged clan will secede from the three-clan union. I'm going to avenge my son, and no one will be able to stop me!"

He smashed the conference table to smithereens with one fist, spread his wings, and prepared to fly off, but the moment he did so, two more figures appeared by his side: the clan leaders of the rainbow- and black-winged.

"White-winged emperor, regardless of whether you're in our union, you're a representative of the winged. If you dare touch Zhang Lie, reconciliation between the humans and the winged won't be a possibility. I apologize, but we can't let you leave!" the rainbow-winged clan leader called out, causing the white-winged emperor's eyes to widen in range.

"You mean to keep me under house arrest?! As the emperor of the winged, how can I do nothing about the murder of my son?!"

Now wasn't the time for diplomacy. In rage, the white-winged emperor took to the air and attacked the rainbow- and black-winged clan heads. He was stronger than both the rainbow- and black-winged clan heads, but that didn't mean he would be able to challenge them both simultaneously.

With the rainbow- and black-winged clan heads working together, even if they weren't able to defeat him, they could certainly stall him in place. And while they restricted him from acting, their subordinates began to restrain the white-winged forces.

The rainbow- and black-winged clans had been informed of the news last night, and they had made all necessary preparations before confronting the white-winged emperor. In just half an hour, the white-winged forces present on the planet were subjugated by the rainbow- and black-winged clans, leaving the white-winged emperor alone in his futile resistance.

Although the news of Phoenix's death were still making waves around the general populace, as long as the two clan heads restricted the white-winged emperor from fanning the flames of vengeance, things would quickly settle down.

On the other hand, Earth was in a state of extreme celebration. Zhang Lie and his team's victory had been transformative for the Solar System at large; in a fair match, Zhang Lie had managed to kill the young leader of the winged outright, subduing him in an unbelievable show of force, demonstrating the might and strength of mankind.

The moment Zhang Lie was crowned the victor of that match, almost every hunter on Earth found themselves cheering for him.

Chapter 257: The White-Winged Emperor

After cheering for Zhang Lie's victory, the human hunters began to worry that the winged would take revenge for Zhang Lie's actions, and they tried to report the encounter to the world federation. From the world federation's perspective, Zhang Lie hadn't done anything wrong by killing his opponent, and the winged hadn't responded excessively to Phoenix's death. As a result, even the highest authorities had no right to step in to adjudicate the matter.

The white-winged emperor ultimately managed to free himself from the combined onslaught of both the rainbow- and black-winged clan leader, but it ultimately was to no avail: the rest of his subordinates had all been taken down by the other two clans' forces by then.

Because of that memorable first match between Zhang Lie and Phoenix, the audience hadn't paid full attention to the remaining matches. Even after a day, the sight of Phoenix melting seemed to be ingrained in their mind.

Most shockingly, however, was the reaction of the winged to this entire affair. Despite their young prince being killed, the winged's revenge amounted to little more than a party offering scant resistance on Zhang Lie's route back to his hotel that night.

"Didn't you see Zhang Lie's escort last night? The starbeasts, nightdemons, and aquatics all sent guards his way?"

"Ah, I also noticed something interesting. All three clans from the winged used to stay in the Sufei Hotel, but something changed last night. The rainbow- and black-winged are still there, but the white-winged, to which Phoenix belonged, has vanished overnight! Given my experience, I bet there's been a schism in the clan!"

"A schism? You're wrong! This isn't something that can be described as a mere schism—apparently, the three clans are no longer united! I heard that the reason for this was because Zhang Lie told the other two winged clans that, as long as the white-winged were in power, he wouldn't help them with their limit fragment research."

"What?! Surely not—the winged lost a prince, the humans got away more or less unscathed, and it's the winged who are being forced to apologize?"

"Is that so exaggerated? I think not. After all, don't you see just how many forces Zhang Lie has amassed? Even the winged have to be wary of his strength. Furthermore, Phoenix was the cause of this whole affair, so isn't it natural that the winged would have to pay the price?"

Indeed, given how the winged usually behaved, most members of the audience landed on the conclusion that they were cowed by Zhang Lie's strength.

The next morning, the roster for the six upcoming matches was released.

Zhang Lie VS Li Feng

Fang Yi VS Xing Hui

Sun Mengmeng VS Lianna

Zhou Ying VS Xing Bai

Pu Kui VS Xing Yan

Pu Feng VS Yang Ze

Everyone turned to Li Feng with some sympathy in their gaze. He had really gotten unlucky, hadn't he? At the very least, none of the subsequent matches were between members of Team Zenith.

Sun Mengmeng's match with Lianna would likely be an exciting one; both hunters were of roughly equal strength, and their elemental attunements were diametrically opposed.

In the match between Fang Yi and Xing Hui, Zhang Lie favored Fang Yi. After all, Xing Hui was a hunter focused on strength, and he would be perfectly countered by Fang Yi's superlative speed.

Zhou Ying, unfortunately, would likely lose in her match against Xing Bai. As far as he knew, Xing Bai was stronger than even Phoenix himself. Fortunately, given the amiable relationship between the humans and the stardemons, it was unlikely that Xing Bai would hurt Zhou Ying too severely.

He expected Pu Kui to win against Xing Yan, given Pu Kui's status as the young leader of her clan. And, finally, for the match between Yang Ze and Pu Feng, Zhang Lie naturally favored his disciple.

After half an hour, the matches that day began in earnest.

"Captain, should I surrender directly?" Li Feng asked Zhang Lie.

None of his current success would have been possible without Zhang Lie, so he was rather nervous to be facing him now as an official opponent.

"Don't worry. Think of it as a sparring match between the two of us—show me how you've grown since we've last fought!"

"Yes, Captain!"

The result of this match was all but predetermined, so the audience didn't intend on paying it much mind: considering that Li Feng was one of Zhang Lie's teammates, it seemed obvious that Li Feng would admit defeat immediately.

Both competitors were teleported on stage.

"On the main arena, Zhang Lie VS Li Feng. The fight begins in ten seconds!"

...

"Begin!"

However, even from the beginning, the match didn't play out as the audience had anticipated.

"Zhang Lie, your life is forfeit!" A gigantic black hole suddenly emerged by the side of the main arena, and a white-winged hunter stepped out in glorious majesty—until he opened his mouth, and a piercing howl shook the battlefield.

"It's the white-winged emperor!" one member of the audience cried out.

Clearly, the white-winged emperor was here to claim Zhang Lie's life in revenge for his son's death. Feathers shot out of the emperor's six wings, and Zhang Lie's eyes widened in shock. Never had he felt the fear of death so close to his heart; he knew that, within the next thousandth of a second, the feathers would pierce through his body.

His opponent was too strong—at the very least, the white-winged emperor was a fourth-realm monarch-class hunter. Any other hunter might have closed his eyes and waited for his death, but Zhang Lie wouldn't. He had already perished once before; as long as he remained alive, he wouldn't give up.

Moments before death, Zhang Lie instantly activated his moonlight wyrm, white grub, venombane scorpion, forest wolfman, runic salamander, and blood ant soulshards.

A small, thin wyrm shot toward the feathers as quickly as a ray of moonlight while silvery-white armor materialized over Zhang Lie's body. Venombane appeared in Zhang Lie's right hand, and his body began to transform into that of a forest wolfman. Runic engravings crept up his arms, chest, and face.

As a blood moon appeared in the sky, his surroundings were dyed red, momentarily slowing down all attacks in his vicinity.

"[Ninesoul Dragonblade—First Form: Parting the River]!" The activation of all six soulshards gave Zhang Lie enough time to launch just one blow. Venombane pushed aside the feathers heading in Zhang Lie's direction, but they traveled so quickly that all his counterattack managed was to redirect them slightly. One shot straight toward the center of his forehead, too fast to be stalled by any other means.

The white feather stabbed into Zhang Lie's skin.

Beside him, a bubble seemed to pop. Two fingers crept out of the void and plucked that feather out of Zhang Lie's skin before it could kill him, removing its momentum as cleanly as though it really were nothing more than an ordinary feather.

Time seemed to have stopped completely; even the white-winged emperor was frozen stiff.

"Ah, I barely made it in time." A human popped into existence beside Zhang Lie. He was dressed in casual black armor, with a rather nondescript face. Zhang Lie didn't recognize him; indeed, if not for his startling actions, he wouldn't have paid any attention to him at all.

The sense of stasis suddenly faded. The white-winged emperor opposite Zhang Lie opened his eyes wide in dismay. "You—Martial Sage Hong Tianqi!"

Who else could have saved Zhang Lie from his doom? Zhang Lie released a sigh he had been holding back. If Hong Tianqi had just been a second later...

"You're really as rash and prone to anger as ever, aren't you?" Hong Tianqi spoke to the white-winged emperor as though he were lecturing a child.

"So what if you've broken through, Hong Tianqi? As if you'd dare step out of the fifth realm. Others might fear you, but I won't. No one will stop me from avenging my son today!" The white-winged emperor morphed into a beam of white light that shot toward Zhang Lie, another attack that Zhang Lie was unable to resist.

It moved so rapidly that Zhang Lie's brain simply couldn't process it in time; even if he could react, he had no defense strong enough to block it, nor movement fast enough to avoid it.

Fortunately, with Hong Tianqi around, he wasn't in danger.

Chapter 258: Easily Dealt With

"Oh? That's interesting, but you're still not skilled enough!" Hong Tianqi called out, clenching his right fist and freezing the white-winged emperor in place, even in the midst of his transformation. Space and time itself seemed to freeze.

"Keep it up, lad. I'm looking forward to your performance!" Hong Tianqi whispered to Zhang Lie. Then, with a flick of his left hand, the frozen white-winged emperor vanished from sight like a cleanly erased pencil mark.

Subsequently, Hong Tianqi stepped forward, space parting in front of him like a curtain, and vanished from the match.

Everyone stared at where the two monarch-level hunters had vanished without a word. The scene was simply too shocking! Soon enough, the audience recovered from their shock and began murmuring to each other.

"What... was that?!"

"He dealt with the white-winged emperor so easily—is this the true strength of Martial Sage Hong Tianqi?"

"So, what happened to the white-winged emperor at the very end?"

"Isn't Zhang Lie really strong? He was even able to hold out a little against the white-winged emperor's attack!"

"Well, if he hadn't, he'd be dead right now. Damn, that fight alone was worth the price of attending the Void Cup!"

"Isn't it? You wouldn't be able to see a fight between Martial Sage Hong Tianqi and the white-winged emperor otherwise, no matter how much you paid! Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Zhang Lie must be quite important among the humans for Martial Sage Hong Tianqi to step in on a moment's notice."

"Well, that's obvious! The theory of limit fragments he's developed is worth at least that much."

"Martial Sage Hong Tianqi made his breakthrough after Zhang Lie's development of limit fragments, didn't he? Could the two be related?"

"Surely not—you mean that these limit fragments are valuable even for the older generation of hunters?! If that's the case..."

As the spectators in the stands commented on what had happened, so too did the competitors.

The appearance of the white-winged emperor and Martial Sage Hong Tianqi forced a halt to the match between Zhang Lie and Li Feng.

The host in charge of the galactic stage of the Void Cup, a monarch-level hunter whose strength wouldn't lose out to even the white-winged emperor, Voice of the Wind, Packard, appeared on stage.

After confirming that Zhang Lie and Li Feng were both alright, he sighed in relief and announced, "Honored guests, because of the sudden appearance of the white-winged emperor, the Void Cup will temporarily be paused while we repair the spatial rift that he generated. The tournament will resume at 2 PM. I apologize for the sudden disturbance."

It was clear that the blame for this entire affair rested with the winged—more specifically, with the white-winged emperor. Not five minutes later, the winged sent an announcement to the attendees of the Void Cup, apologizing for the white-winged emperor's misdeeds and clarifying that he had been deposed the day before, that his actions didn't represent those of the winged.

The official explanation was that he had been in secluded cultivation when he learned of his son's death, and the shock had disrupted his mentality. Because of this, he had been forced to abdicate, and the winged could hardly be held responsible for what he had done.

The hunters of Earth blinked upon seeing this announcement.

"The winged really are... decisive, aren't they?" Yang Ze murmured.

"It's normal. It would be foolish for them to do anything less," Zhang Lie commented. "You all saw how close I was to dying, didn't you? I'm sure the Void Cup will take this matter seriously. That white-winged emperor might have vanished, but the winged will surely be penalized for his actions. I expect they'll receive a hundred-year ban from the Void Cup—can you imagine how many opportunities that would represent for their hunters?"

"The winged certainly aren't going to want to lose such a valuable opportunity. Of course they would clarify that the white-winged emperor was acting independently! If I'm not mistaken, they'll even send us some gifts as reparation, and perhaps some diplomats to improve the relationship between our races.

"Surely not, Captain?" Yang Ze's face revealed his confusion.

"Right, the white-winged emperor himself was taken away! Aren't the humans and winged basically going to remain enemies now?"

"Why not? The winged have made themselves very clear—the white-winged aren't in charge anymore. What's there not to accept about improving the relationship between our races? I hardly doubt the white-winged emperor's dead—it's more likely than not that Martial Sage Hong Tianqi simply forced him to leave.

Fang Yi frowned. "Why didn't Martial Sage Hong Tianqi kill him outright?"

From his perspective, the white-winged emperor seemed like a life-threatening obstacle, and his heart palpitated when he thought about how close their captain had come to dying. Without a doubt, were they the ones standing in the arena, the white-winged emperor's attack would have killed them. This was an opportunity to get rid of a latent threat: why wouldn't Martial Sage Hong Tianqi strike?

"I'm not sure either, but the martial sage is likely privy to considerations beyond our knowledge."

In fact, Zhang Lie did have a guess or two, but he didn't want to reveal his thoughts. After all, it wasn't necessarily good for the hunters of Team Zenith to learn about some things too early.

"Captain, what was the white-winged emperor's attack like? We were scared for you just watching you on the screen! Were the white-winged emperor's feathers really all that scary? I saw that you used all your major soulshards—was that little wyrm from the moonlight wyrm soulshard? Won't you tell us?"

Zhang Lie's performance had whetted their curiosity. Sun Mengmeng was the first to question him about it, and the others all eyed Zhang Lie and Li Feng.

"Don't look at me—I was so scared that I don't remember anything!" Li Feng was merely glad he had survived the ordeal.

Everyone then turned to Zhang Lie instead.

"All I was thinking about was trying to survive," Zhang Lie replied honestly. "I activated my six major soulshards instinctively, but as you all saw, it was useless. Against the white-winged emperor's absolute strength, there was little I could do, and even I would have perished if not for Martial Sage Hong Tianqi's timely assistance.

"As for the moonlight wurm soulshard... well, I've exposed it already, haven't I? I don't suppose there's anything to hide now. Whitey, why don't you come out and greet everyone?"

Zhang Lie extended his right arm, and a small white wurm peeked out from his sleeve. It was about the size of a standard garden snake, and pure white all over with a triangular-shaped head. Unlike common snakes, however, it had four conical, pale-blue horns jutting out of its head, and its eyes were so large that they filled half its face. All in all, it was a ridiculously cute creature.

Upon seeing the little wurm, the hunters instantly thought of their fight against the moonlight wurm.

"This, Captain, y-you—!" Sun Mengmeng was tongue-tied in her excitement. As far as she could tell, this was a summoned beast, which meant that the moonlight wurm's soulshard was a summoning-type soulshard, the rarest of the rare!

Except for the white grub soulshard that Zhang Lie possessed, this moonlight wurm soulshard could well be worth as much as his other soulshards combined.

The probability of finding a summoning-type soulshard was extremely low, and it was by far the hardest type of soulshard to acquire.

Zhang Lie didn't know whether this was a result of his luck or an unintended side-effect of smashing the superior-grade moonlight wurm soulshard to pieces to increase the density of spiritual matter in the air, but regardless of how it had happened, he was now the owner of a summoning-type soulshard.

"Ah, it's so cute! Is it considered alive?" Li Feng and Zhou Ying cooed at the little wurm.

"It's a spiritual lifeform without a physical body, but it is alive, in principle. It took me quite some effort to hatch it, and it only recently took material form. While it remained in my soulspace, it looked like nothing more than a wisp of white smoke."

"A spiritual lifeform... does that mean that it'll only die when you do, Captain?"

"That's right, and that's the case for all summoned lifeforms. Of course, if you don't need it at the moment, you can return it to your soulspace."

Whitey swam out of Zhang Lie's sleeve and around the room, causing everyone who saw it to smile.

In the end, it was Sun Mengmeng who asked the most important question. "How strong is it? Can it fight?"

Everyone's eyes gleamed as they turned to Zhang Lie. It was evident that Whitey was an exceptional lifeform, but no one knew just what it could do.

Chapter 259: Absolute Obeisance

Glancing at everyone's ardent gazes, Zhang Lie said, "It's a spiritual lifeform, so its authority deals with the soul. The reason I summoned it was because of Whitey's characteristic technique: consuming spiritual energy."

"Consuming spiritual energy?" Yang Ze echoed, somewhat confused.

"Right. Sufficiently strong or dense genetic energy will generate mental energy, also known as spiritual energy. Spiritual energy can be used for mental attacks or defenses, and Whitey's ability to consume spiritual energy will simultaneously weaken my opponent and strengthen myself," Zhang Lie explained.

Mental energy, spiritual power... these were concepts far beyond their reach at present.

"In that case, captain, what happens to someone who has all their spiritual power drained?" Yang Ze asked.

Fang Yi smiled. "If I'm not mistaken, the hunter will become nothing more than an empty shell, devoid of soul and spirit. It's a fate worse than death!"

Everyone's eyes widened as they considered Fang Yi's words, then turned to Zhang Lie.

"Yes, Fang Yi's pretty much correct," Zhang Lie added, causing everyone to look toward Whitey with awe. Here was a frightening lifeform that could devour one's soul!

Just as everyone was captivated by Whitey, a knock came from outside the humans' waiting room.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, I'm Hong Yu from the winged, here to pay you a visit!"

Despite Zhang Lie claiming that a representative of the winged would soon arrive to make reparations, the hunters of Team Zenith weren't sure whether or not to believe him— but what he said had indeed happened!

Zhang Lie smiled. Stowing Whitey away, he called out, "Please, come in!"

Hong Yu entered with two winged guards, one blue-winged and the other black-winged. It did seem as though the white-winged emperor, and indeed the whole of the white-winged clan, had lost status and power. Only then would he and his fellow humans truly be safe.

"Mr. Zhang Lie, please allow me to tender my sincerest apologies for what you faced in the arena today. These are rainbow fruits native to the land of the rainbow-winged, and I hope you'll accept this gift!" Hong Yu bowed deeply toward Zhang Lie the moment she entered, her attitude earnest.

Nevertheless, Zhang Lie didn't say anything, and the members of Team Zenith looked toward her with distrustful faces.

After a pregnant pause, Hong Yu continued, "I apologize, Mr. Zhang Lie. Although the white-winged emperor had already been expelled from the union of the winged, we bear ultimate responsibility for the affair. We are deeply sorry for his actions, so please allow us to make reparations,"

She was so deferential that even her two guards were surprised.

Zhang Lie finally spoke. "Make reparations? I almost died during the match today!"

Zhang Lie glanced toward her with dissatisfaction.

Hong Yu sighed, then retrieved a wooden box from her robes which she placed on the table. "On behalf of the winged, we have specially prepared a panacea for you: the serum of the emperor swallow!"

The hunters of Team Zenith had never heard of such a thing, but Zhang Lie clearly did. "The serum of the emperor swallow? The swallows tended to by the rainbow-winged clan leader himself?"

"A rare panacea indeed, and the greatest sincerity the rainbow-winged clan can offer at present," Hong Yu replied, emphasizing the word 'greatest'.

Zhang Lie swiftly claimed the two gifts as his own, then smiled. "Very well. For the serum, if nothing else, I'll temporarily forgive you."

The three representatives of the rainbow-winged clan fought hard to quell their inner turmoil. Who did Zhang Lie think he was?! These were rare and potent items that even a fourth-realm hunter would have to pay an arm and a leg for!

Of course, the representatives kept these thoughts to themselves. They didn't dare provoke this man any further, not after what he had done to Phoenix and the white-winged clan.

"We thank you for your clemency, Mr. Zhang Lie." Hong Yu's obeisance left the members of Team Zenith feeling rather awkward.

After all, Zhang Lie had murdered the prince of the winged, and had all but destroyed the white-winged emperor's authority in the process. The winged were surely in the right to look unfavorably upon him; why were they trying so hard to get into his good graces now?

These rainbow fruits that Hong Yu had brought out were rare enough already, but with the addition of the serum of the emperor swallow, which sounded to be of immeasurable value just from its name alone...

"Very good. It looks as though the winged finally have a wise representative," Zhang Lie commented.

"Please, Mr. Zhang, I'm no match for the likes of you!" Hong Yu exclaimed, smiling politely.

"Regardless, I hope this will be the end of the conflict between the humans and the winged. In that case, I'll leave a spot for you in the second batch of openings for the limit fragment research."

"Th-Thank you, Mr. Zhang! Please, feel free to reach out to me at any time with regards to what you need for the research. The winged will do our best to satisfy your requests!"

Chapter 260: The Pitiful Winged

The outcome of the clash between the humans and the winged came as a surprise to many; after all, most spectators hadn't looked favorably on the humans. However, the humans had come out decisively on top in the conflict, with the winged losing both Phoenix and the white-winged emperor, along with quite a fair bit of reputation.

After the affair, many races specifically warned their representatives in the Void Cup not to provoke the humans. The power of these limit fragments, along with the humans' strong backer, Martial Sage Hong Tianqi, had transformed a race once thought to be weak to one of the foremost races of the galaxy.

At least before these other races were able to acquire limit fragments of their own, no one would want to go against the human race.

Hong Yu left the humans' waiting room in turmoil. She knew that, despite paying a heavy price, all she had accomplished was to leave the winged and the humans on neutral terms; securing Zhang Lie's cooperation and goodwill would likely require significantly more investment.

The ramifications of the white-winged emperor's failed assassination attempt quickly made themselves known.

Although Martial Sage Hong Tianqi was known to be an extremely strong hunter, few had thought him able to contend for a spot at the pinnacle. However, after the footage of his fight against the white-winged emperor began to spread, it became clear that Hong Tianqi really had reached the pinnacle of his path.

Even the highest authority of the world federation were flabbergasted by what he had managed to accomplish. Given his understanding of Martial Sage Hong Tianqi, it wasn't unusual that Hong Tianqi would be able to advance, but Hong Tianqi had done so far more quickly than he had anticipated. As far as his predictions went, Hong Tianqi would have to train in the dimensional realm for at least another decade before making such a leap forward.

As a result, he grew much more interested in the limit fragments that these humans had professed to have developed. After all, as the highest authority in the world federation, he had learned of the trade between Zhang Lie and Hong Tianqi.

Instead of returning to the authorities' palace, Hong Tianqi brought the restrained white-winged emperor to one particular deep, chaotic recess of space. This was where the Milky Way's defenders fought against alien invaders that threatened to take over the entire galaxy, one of the most vicious battlefields in the region.

"You'll regret not killing me today, you bastard human!" the white-winged emperor cried out.

Those sent to this chaotic battlefield would only have the chance to return after twenty years—if they didn't perish by then.

"Regret? Do you think that you'll still be able to threaten me or that young lad after twenty years? Be grateful that I've allowed you to die honorably!" Hong Tianqi informed him.

Indeed, given Hong Tianqi's current strength, there was no conceivable means by which the white-winged emperor could catch up to him. On a battlefield like this, even fifty years wouldn't be sufficient.

As for threatening Zhang Lie after twenty years, that was even less likely. Just who was Zhang Lie? Using his past life's experience, it had taken him little more than three real-world months to advance from the lowest of the low to one of the most likely competitors to be crowned the champion in the galactic stage of the Void Cup.

Given the theory of limit fragments which he had brought back with him, he expected he would be able to trounce the white-winged emperor in little more than a year, let alone two.

"Just you wait—I'll make you pay for what you've done to me!" the white-winged emperor called out again.

Hong Tianqi didn't deign to reply. He dragged him, like a little chick, over to the teleportation array and activated it.

After the disturbance that morning, the Void Cup resumed in the afternoon. Because of all that had happened in the morning, Li Feng decided to surrender immediately. After all, they would be able to spar against each other at any time; given how much attention was on them now, it would be better to keep a low profile.

The next match was between Fang Yi and Xing Hui. Even after the match commenced, however, the two competitors didn't start battling immediately.

"Fang Yi, after yesterday's banquet, I hope you'll consider us friends," Xing Hui began.

Fang Yi nodded. "Of course— but that doesn't mean I'll go easy on you!"

"Haha, that's exactly what I wanted to say, Fang Yi! Shall we fight with our full strength? Let's not let this impact the relationship between we starbeasts and you humans."

"Very well. Show me the extent of your strength, Xing Hui!"

Two frightening auras emerged from the two competitors, and Xing Hui transformed into his battle-ready form: from a white monkey the size of a dog to a five- or six-meter tall beast adorned with a purplish-black armor.

As they clashed head-on, Xing Hui took two massive steps back, while Fang Yi was forced back over a hundred meters from the extent of Xing Hui's blow.

"Impressive, impressive! Who would have expected a speed-oriented hunter like you to possess such strength? Again!" Xing Hui roared. With his right claw, he struck at Fang Yi, his attack boasting such strength that the tips of his claws were scraping at the fabric of the world.

"I'm not going to take that attack head-on!" Fang Yi shouted, activating his own techniques. He dashed forward, underneath one of Xing Hui's arms, and brandished his spear at Xing Hui's chest.

"Not bad! Come at me!" Xing Hui's reaction to Fang Yi's impending attack shocked the crowd—not only did he not back down, he even stuck his chest out, as if inviting the blow.

With a crisp metallic clink, Fang Yi's spear bent into the shape of a U, causing him and the spectators to gasp in amazement. Fang Yi's probing blow had failed to even make a dent in his opponent's defense!

Moments later, Fang Yi made use of the momentum from the failed attack to launch himself back.

"Do you think you can get away so easily?!" Xing Hui swatted him aside as though he were a mosquito, causing Fang Yi to smash against the protective shield surrounding the arena. The shield wavered and rippled; the strength of Xing Hui's attack was obvious.

Fang Yi spat out a mouthful of blood. "You really are strong. In that case, there's no way I can hold back!"

Fang Yi's expression turned serious as chitinous armor covered his body. A pair of wind- and lightning-laced wings sprouted from his back, then turned a sudden blood red. The entire arena flashed with red lightning, causing even Xing Hui's eyes to widen. "[Heaven's Judgment: Tribulation of Lightning]!"

Fang Yi launched his spear from his hands. Amidst a roar of thunder, the spear began rotating more and more quickly, summoning the power of wind and storm that suffused the arena. It shot toward Xing Hui like a tornado.

"You asked for it! Take this!" Xing Hui clenched his right fist, surrounding it with milky-white genetic energy, then punched forward. As he did so, his arm seemed to vanish; the surrounding space ruptured from the strength of his blow.

Fang Yi's spear crashed against Xing Hui's fist in a momentous explosion that shocked the spectators. In the aftermath of the blow, an obsidian spear windmilled into the distance, its momentum and energy drained.

It looked as though Xing Hui had punched it aside with his fearsome blow, but in truth, Xing Hui's right hand was charred and blackened. Blood slowly dripped down his clenched fist. Xing Hui slumped back with a defeated look on his face; he had lost.

If Fang Yi hadn't forcibly reclaimed much of the attack's genetic energy at the last minute, his right arm would have been completely paralyzed. Fang Yi's spear, launched with the full reserves of his genetic energy, had penetrated his defenses almost immediately.

"I admit defeat! What a magnificent blow—I can't believe it!"

"I apologize, but you were so strong I could hardly risk close-ranged combat," Fang Yi replied, smiling.

Thunderous applause came from the stands. Although the match hadn't lasted a long time, the strength that both competitors showed was an immense shock. Xing Hui's brute strength and Fang Yi's piercing lightning had left a deep impression on their minds.