

U. Warlord 261

Chapter 261: Top Six

The next match was between Sun Mengmeng and Lianna of the aquatic. Even before the match began, the crowd had already begun to murmur: Lianna was water-attuned and Sun Mengmeng was fire-attuned, so this match would surely be interesting.

"Sun Mengmeng, you'll fight me at full strength, won't you? What happens in this arena stays in this arena!"

"Of course, Princess Lianna. I won't go easy on you!"

"In that case, let's begin!" Lianna activated her genetic energy. A conch-like object by her chest began to glow, forming a patch of ocean around her.

Sun Mengmeng didn't dare take Lianna lightly. Almost as she activated her item, Sun Mengmeng cast [Black Sun], forming a cordon of purplish-black flame around her. Finally, she activated her most important soulshards for battle, transforming from a young woman to a fierce warrior with a chitinous carapace, wreathed in black flame.

"[Netherworld's Gaze]!" Sun Mengmeng shot out tens of arrows toward Lianna.

"[The Lily Blooms]!" Lianna splayed out her hands, and a gorgeous patch of water lilies came to life by her feet. These lilies were large but intricate, and covered in a crystalline sheen that made them resemble delicate pieces of art.

Sun Mengmeng's hail of arrows struck the water lilies, leaving a few smoking craters behind, but were ultimately unable to penetrate the multilayered petals that protected Lianhua.

"Take this—[Netherworld's Torrential Flame]!" A frightening fan of flames poured out from Sun Mengmeng's bow, an attack far stronger than the volley of shots she had activated just prior. The strength of her attack shocked Lianna and the gathered crowd.

Most astoundingly, the flames didn't seem to stop pouring out of her bow, because Sun Mengmeng's hands were still moving as fast as ever. While she still had stamina, this frightening attack wouldn't come to an end.

The sight boggled the spectators, and even Lianna was awed by her strength. However, as Sun Mengmeng's opponent, she certainly couldn't take this attack lightly.

"[Kingdom of Water]!" As her conch shell glowed with pure blue light, seawater poured out of it, rejuvenating the injured water lilies and summoning countless merwarriors from deep within the ocean.

The water lilies, unfortunately, perished quickly to Sun Mengmeng's neverending torrent of flame. The merwarriors charged forward at the rain of black flame, though they too were destroyed almost immediately as the fire landed on them. However, they could be reformed endlessly with Lianna's water-attuned genetic energy.

As a result, the two competitors ended up in a sort of equilibrium; the winner would be determined by who could outlast the other.

Zhang Lie stopped paying attention to the battle. At this point, it was clear who would win: Sun Mengmeng. Lianna certainly wouldn't be a match for her when it came to stamina. Sun Mengmeng had started off as nothing more than an ordinary girl from the capital. In order to keep up with Zhang Lie, she had put in more work than any ten normal hunters combined.

From what Zhang Lie could recall, she spent at least ten hours a day practicing her archery and refining her genetic energy. Even compared to the other members of Team Zenith, she worked harder than everyone but Fang Yi and Yang Ze.

Furthermore, her stamina was boosted by her limit fragments and her ten peak gene fragments, so there was no way she could lose.

The spectators were raptly observing the confrontation between the two hunters. Their match seemed more like two armies clashing against each other, and the sight was astounding to behold. After all, they were only first-realm hunters, and there were second-realm hunters in the audience who couldn't claim to be able to do as much.

The fight persisted for a surprising amount of time. By the time Lianna surrendered, her face pale and gasping, they had fought for one whole hour.

Neither combatant was able to risk changing tactics on the fly without getting hit by their opponent's attack, so the match had turned into one of pure endurance. And after one whole hour, no matter how impressive their techniques were, the spectators were getting rather tired.

When they heard Lianna surrender, quite a few hunters even heaved a sigh of relief.

As the spectators murmured to each other, Sun Mengmeng shook Lianna's hand as she returned to the humans' waiting room.

"Sister, congratulations! You're at least among the top six competitors in the Void Cup, and you could even get into the top three if you win the next fight!" Sun Xiaowu shouted the moment she returned.

"Congratulations on advancing, Sun Mengmeng!" the other hunters of Team Zenith all called out.

Sun Mengmeng thanked them all before looking toward Zhang Lie, wanting to get his opinion on how the fight had gone.

"You played excellently to your strengths. Good work, Sun Mengmeng!"

"Thank you, Captain!" She smiled happily when she obtained the praise she was hoping for.

After Sun Mengmeng's fight, the next few matches would be rather tough. Zhou Ying was the next competitor up; her opponent was Xing Bai. Based on Xing Hui's match against Fang Yi, Zhang Lie didn't give her more than a 30% chance of winning.

After all, Zhou Ying's opponent favored brute strength, whereas Zhou Ying herself focused on deterring her opponent. Zhou Ying's methods would be extremely effective against a weaker opponent, but Zhang Lie expected that Xing Bai would be able to overcome it all with brute strength alone.

As expected, Zhou Ying lasted only a minute against Xing Bai. She exchanged three blows with him; Xing Bai destroyed all her vines during that period of time, then forced her to the side of the arena, where she had no choice but to admit defeat.

Against Xing Bai's frightening, oppressive strength, she had no recourse; indeed, most of the other hunters from Team Zenith would also have lost to him. It was evident that Xing Bai himself also possessed a few peak gene fragments, and as the young leader of the starbeasts, his strength could only be greater than even that of Xing Hui.

After these two matches, the remaining ones weren't very exciting. Pu Kui barely won against Xing Yan of the starbeasts after using a variety of secret techniques and potions, and Yang Ze naturally overwhelmed Pu Feng in the last match of the day.

After all, Pu Feng was only the third-ranked competitor among the nightdemons, and he had only managed to make it into the top twelve from sheer luck alone. It was inevitable that he would end up facing an opponent he couldn't overcome, but such a high rank wasn't anything to scoff at.

With Yang Ze's victory, the top six competitors of the Void Cup were established: Zhang Lie, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, Yang Ze, Xing Bai, and Pu Kui.

Of these six competitors, an overwhelming four came from the human race, an outcome that shocked the gathered crowd. No other race had managed such a feat in the entirety of the Void Cup; the members of Team Zenith were creating history at that very moment.

In fact, if Zhang Lie were to face Xing Bai in the subsequent match, there was a very good chance that the humans would end up monopolizing the top three spots in the Void Cup, causing Zhang Lie to become the idol of all the hunters in China, Earth, and even the Solar System at large.

Indeed, without Zhang Lie, there wouldn't be a Team Zenith, and the human race surely wouldn't have been able to come up with limit fragments. And without any of those factors, the humans certainly wouldn't have been able to uniformly enter the top hundred, let alone have the chance to monopolize the top three.

Whether they would succeed would have to await the schedule to be released tomorrow, but their successes today were already well worth celebrating. Yan Long and Su Feng had already set up a banquet at the Nike Hotel by the time Zhang Lie and the others returned.

In the past, thinking that Zhang Lie was a little arrogant, Yan Long had avoided heaping praise on him to his face, but given his superlative performance in the Void Cup, Yan Long couldn't care less anymore.

Chapter 262: An Enthusiastic Fight

"Haha, Zhang Lie, I knew I made the right choice in supporting you!" Su Feng boomed, his face equally excited. The events of the day would surely enter the annals of history; how could he and Yan Long not understand the enormity of what Zhang Lie had accomplished?

Zhang Lie threw back his head and laughed. "I'm not finished yet—watch me claim the Void Throne as my own!"

"In that case, let's hope that you end up fighting against Xing Bai tomorrow so we can claim the top three spots for Earth," Su Feng murmured.

They headed to the table, which was replete with freshly prepared food. The hunters, exhausted from their day of competition, dug in with gusto. They could clearly sense the caliber of their opponents increasing; except for Sun Xiaowu and Li Feng, everyone else had to show at least part of their true skill.

Because there would still be another day of competition ahead, Yan Long and Su Feng hadn't arranged any other activities. The hunters quickly returned to their hotel, where they began to prepare for the finals of the Void Cup the next day.

As Zhang Lie and the rest of Team Zenith arrived at the competition grounds the next day, coincidentally, so did Xing Bai and Pu Kui. They all met at the entrance to the tournament grounds and ended up chatting a little.

"Zhang Lie, please go easy on me if we end up fighting!" Xing Bai pleaded.

"Right, me too! I'm happy just having gotten to this point. If we really end up fighting, Zhang Lie, please don't make me lose too badly." Pu Kui had faced Zhang Lie herself, and she was quite aware of his strength. Given what had happened to Phoenix, she certainly wasn't going to provoke Zhang Lie.

Zhang Lie smiled, replying to Pu Kui, "Of course not! It would be in bad taste. As for you, Xing Bai, didn't you want to test my strength? If we do end up facing each other, let's both give it our all, then."

"Haha, very well! I'm sure I can't compete in anything else, but in terms of strength..." Zhang Lie's suggestion immediately roused Xing Bai's interest.

The three parties all headed into their respective waiting rooms and waited for the roster to be announced. The moment the first match-up was decided, everyone cheered, especially the humans and the starbeasts.

Zhang Lie VS Xing Bai

No one understood better than they just what this fight represented.

"Ah, they're the two strongest competitors in the Void Cup! This will be a history-defining moment, I'm sure of it!"

Compared to this first match-up, the next two would be far less interesting, because the winner of this match would undoubtedly become the champion of the Void Cup. If Zhang Lie were to win, then without a doubt, the humans could take all three podium positions in this iteration of the Void Cup, but if Xing Bai were to win, then the best the humans could manage would be second and third place.

Sun Mengmeng VS Pu Kui

Fang Yi VS Yang Ze

The next two match-ups were quickly revealed, but they garnered far less attention. The fight between Sun Mengmeng and Pu Kui would likely start out strong, but with Pu Kui's surrender moments later, whereas Fang Yi likely had a slight advantage against Yang Ze, who had had to start from scratch with a difficult framework to master.

Regardless of who won the third match, however, it would be a human who advanced. Glancing at the roster, Zhang Lie sighed in relief. Team Zenith would indeed be able to claim first, second, and third place in this year's Void Cup.

"Captain!" The members of Team Zenith had clearly noticed this point too.

Zhang Lie smiled. "You've all worked hard, everyone, and these are the fruits of our labor—an accomplishment never before achieved in history."

The first match seemed to begin in the blink of an eye.

"Zhang Lie, we finally face each other!" Xing Bai smiled, as joyful as a kid in an amusement park. The moment he had learned of Zhang Lie, he had wanted to fight him, but he had never had an opportunity until now.

"Right, it's past time! Show me all you've got—otherwise, if you're injured, I won't take any responsibility!" Zhang Lie really was quite interested in Xing Bai, who seemed purely focused on the pursuit of strength.

Similarly, Xing Bai respected Zhang Lie's abilities, and he felt a surprising kinship to him. When he heard Zhang Lie's words, he laughed and responded, "To be clear, we're pitting our strength against each other—don't bully me by bringing in your speed too!"

As he spoke, he began transforming into a gigantic beast over five meters tall. His body was covered in burnished silver-white scales shot through with specks of color, reminiscent of twinkling stars. Xing Bai curled his forearms, revealing bunched muscles the size of car tires.

"Very well!" Zhang Lie called back, activating his forest wolfman soulshard.

Fusing his genetic energy with the dense water-attuned genetic energy around him, he advanced the transformation further into a black-furred wolfman whose size and stature were no less imposing than Xing Bai's own.

"I'm coming!" When he saw Zhang Lie's transformation, Xing Bai grinned. He raised his forearms and shot toward Zhang Lie like a bolt of lightning. His punch was so forceful, so fast, that it broke the sound barrier. Space rippled around his fist.

At the same time, Zhang Lie struck with his right fist. A black dragon curled around his arm, shooting forward with unmitigated authority. As the black and white fists smashed against each other, the entire arena distorted, and amidst shocked gasps from the crowd, the barrier separating the arena from the audience began developing spiderweb-like cracks.

"Not good—fix that barrier immediately!" the host of the galactic stage of the Void Cup commanded his subordinates.

They all knew that this match would be a sight to behold, but not to this extent. After all, the barrier separating the competitors from the spectators had been laid down by the combined efforts of a few fourth-realm warders, and no one would have expected that Zhang Lie and Xing Bai alone, two first-realm hunters, would be able to splinter it to such an extent.

The spectators closest to the fight were even getting a little flustered, but three warders had already rushed to the scene to temporarily sustain the barrier before the spectators could make much of a fuss.

As they placed their palms on the barrier, the shuddering and splintering force field immediately regained its usual crystal-clear transparency.

Just as they were about to leave, however, Xing Bai laughed. "Impressive, impressive! Zhang Lie, it's been too long since I've been able to release such a forceful punch without worrying about the consequences! Come, let's go at it again!"

The three warders glanced at each other fretfully.

Chapter 263: Top Three

Before the three warders could say anything, Xing Bai and Zhang Lie struck at each other once more. The barrier splintered before their eyes.

If not for the Void Cup, the fourth-realm warders would have kicked both of them off the stage, but at this point, all they could do was grit their teeth and establish the barrier once more.

However, not a second after they had finished, Xing Bai and Zhang Lie clashed again and again, causing the warders to swear as they fed a constant stream of their genetic energy into the arena. Such was the strength of their blows that they even cracked the barrier shielding them from above.

The three professional warders were hard-pressed just to maintain the structural integrity of that surrounding the arena and keeping the spectators safe. Despite their dissatisfaction, both the combatants within and the spectators outside the arena were extremely satisfied with the fight that was taking place: Zhang Lie and Xing Bai enjoyed being able to let loose, while the spectators enjoyed watching them let loose.

"Xing Bai, you're not bad, as expected of the young leader of the starbeasts. Ah, it's been too long since I had such a good fight!" Zhang Lie laughed.

"You too, Zhang Lie!" Xing Bai roared in excitement.

"That said, we do need to determine a victor. We're about even in terms of strength, but I think I'd win out against you otherwise. Do you still want to fight?"

"Yes, of course! Perhaps there's no chance of winning for me, but I want to sense the difference between you and me, Zhang Lie!" Xing Bai replied earnestly.

"In that case, get ready!" Zhang Lie distanced himself from Xing Bai, then summoned Venombane into his hand. He released a frightening aura of genetic energy as he activated [Eclipse] and his blood ant soulshard, dyeing the skies above the arena a deep red.

This was the manifestation of Zhang Lie's true strength.

"Take this: [Ninesoul Dragonblade—First Form: Parting the River]!"

A black beam of light split the arena in twain. All that the light struck was cleanly bisected, and it cut open a split in the space that had grown distended and distorted due to the strength of the two competitors' blows.

Against such a frightening blow, Xing Bai howled as he pushed his bestial transformation to its greatest extent, crossing his two arms and suffusing his scales with radiant genetic energy. In that moment, he seemed to have morphed into a glowing silver fortress, though despite all his efforts, even from dozens of meters away, he was chilled by the enormity of Zhang Lie's attack.

And the moment he thought that even he couldn't defend against the attack, he was doomed to fail.

Nevertheless, it was too late to make another move. He had hunkered down for defense, and there was no other option left to him. Given the speed of Zhang Lie's attack, as well as the dread he was feeling even when it was so far away, he fully expected to lose both his arms. Faced with this outcome, even Xing Bai couldn't help but quail. As he briefly retracted his arms, the beam of light that seemed poised to cut through everything arced upwards into the air.

Xing Bai hissed in pain—that part of the light which had barely impacted his skin had ripped away his scales, meeting almost no resistance at all.

Of course, he couldn't blame Zhang Lie. If not for his redirecting the attack, Xing Bai would have lost more than just a few scales.

"Thank you for your clemency, Zhang Lie. I admit defeat!" Xing Bai called out.

Thus ended the match that had enraptured the audience; the winner was, of course, Zhang Lie.

"Zhang Lie won—the humans are going to take the top three spots in the tournament!"

"Ah, you're right! I don't think Sun Mengmeng will lose out to Pu Kui, and the third fight's going to be between two humans. If that's the case... my goodness, mankind is about to make history!"

Yesterday, it hadn't been certain just how well the humans would perform, but today, after Zhang Lie's match with Xing Bai, it was almost certain that the humans would dominate this iteration of the Void Cup.

Because of the extent of the destruction which Zhang Lie and Xing Bai's match had caused, there was a longer delay than usual between the matches that day.

The next fight was between Sun Mengmeng and Pu Kui. The two competitors both launched a dazzling salvo of attacks, but the outcome was all but predetermined, and Pu Kui didn't intend to struggle needlessly. After a few rounds of fighting, ensuring that she wouldn't take a loss to her reputation, Pu Kui surrendered.

Yang Ze had no interest in competing with Fang Yi; the moment he got on stage, he surrendered, allowing Fang Yi to advance into the top three.

As a result, the humans officially ended up monopolizing the top three places in the tournament. It was clear to all the spectators just who was responsible for the humans' victory, as well as who would claim the Void Throne: Zhang Lie.

Both Fang Yi and Sun Mengmeng had made a name for themselves as Zhang Lie's subordinates. Because neither of them wanted to compete with the other, the match was decided by a comical game of rock-paper-scissors, with Fang Yi emerging the victor. Subsequently, Fang Yi surrendered to Zhang Lie, and the original timeline for the tournament was brought forward by half a day as a result.

The final matches for the tournament were slated for the afternoon, but owing to this decisive "victory", the awards ceremony was shifted forward instead.

The top ten competitors of the Void Cup were:

1st: Zhang Lie

2nd: Fang Yi

3rd: Sun Mengmeng

4th: Xing Bai

5th: Yang Ze

6th: Pu Kui

7th: Zhou Ying

8th: Lianna

9th: Xing Hui

The humans had claimed half of the top ten positions in the tournament—as well as the top three positions. The final result shocked the entire galaxy. Without a doubt, that day was one of mankind's greatest triumphs, with their having succeeded in an achievement unprecedented in history.

"Dragonwolf Zhang Lie!"

"Team Zenith!"

On the streets, in the alleyways, humans began chanting Zhang Lie's name, a chant that rose from a murmur to a full-fledged roar. The loudest voices came from the hunters, because no one knew better than they did just how impressive Zhang Lie's achievements were, nor just what benefits Zhang Lie's victory would bring to them.

As he returned to the hotel after the end of the tournament, Zhang Lie had no idea of the commotion that awaited him back home; instead, he grew visibly nervous.

Chapter 264: Generous Prizes

He was nervous because the principal reason he had attended the Void Cup was neither for fame nor the Void Throne, but rather for a precious herb for his sister, Zhang Hanxiang. In his past life, he had heard rumors that this was one of the prizes awarded to those champions of the Void Cup. Whether or not that prize did exist, however, wasn't something he was certain about.

He had never mentioned this to anyone else, not even his teammates, but even so, some thoughtful people had noticed.

"Captain, are you worrying about whether or not the prizes will include the fruit of life?" Sun Mengmeng asked, shocking Zhang Lie.

"Mengmeng, how did you know—"

"Isn't it obvious? You would surely prioritize your sister above all else. Apparently, one fruit of life has been handed to almost every champion in past iterations of the Void Cup, allowing them to strengthen their soulspace.

"Really?"

"Within the past three iterations, at the very least."

"Wonderful— thank you, Mengmeng!"

Zhang Lie's worried expression was replaced with one of relief.

"What's going on, Captain? Are you hiding something from us?" Yang Ze, noticing the hushed conversation between Zhang Lie and Sun Mengmeng, crept over.

"Ah, shoo! What's there to hide from you? We're simply discussing the prizes that will be handed out." Zhang Lie's words drew the others' attention.

Of the seven hunters of Team Zenith, five were in the top ten, Li Feng was in the top twelve, and even the unlucky Sun Xiaowu was in eighteenth place. Their rewards would surely be impressive, and everyone was excited to discuss what they would get.

Before they could discuss it in much detail, however, Yan Long and Su Feng rushed over. Zhang Lie and the others were competitors with a specialized passageway for entrance and exit to the tournament grounds, but Yan Long and Su Feng had been stuck amidst a crowd of people and had only just rushed back.

"Congratulations, Zhang Lie! All of you really did it!" Yan Long shouted.

Su Feng clapped Zhang Lie's shoulders a few times, so agitated that he was at a loss for words.

"You're all curious about the prizes you'll receive, aren't you?" Yan Long asked.

The hunters all looked up. Indeed, they might not be well aware of just what the prizes would entail, but Yan Long and Su Feng, who had been responsible for escorting the human representatives for quite a few iterations of the Void Cup, did have some idea.

"Commander Yan Long, please, tell us more!" Yang Ze requested.

Yan Long motioned for everyone to sit down. "First, I'll mention the prizes for the champion of the Void Cup."

Everyone turned to Zhang Lie.

"The prize that everyone cares most about is naturally the Void Throne. It's a throne sculpted out of one of the most precious minerals to be found in deep space, by the most renowned sculptor in the world federation."

"A... decoration?" Fang Yi seemed rather disappointed upon hearing Yan Long's explanation.

"No, no, of course not. It's a domain artifact! The mineral itself is a treasure of unimaginable worth, and the amount of it required to make a throne is sufficient to enhance the rate at which genetic energy condenses for all lifeforms on the planet—and even over the solar system at large.

"This effect is enhanced the closer you are to the throne: if you cultivate while seated directly on it, it'll be at least a tenfold boost; those in the same room will experience a fivefold boost; those in the same city, a twofold boost; those in China, perhaps a boost of 70%; those on Earth, 30-50%; and even those in the Solar System, 10-20%!

"Do you see why everyone's so invested in winning the Void Throne for themselves now?"

Everyone's eyes bulged.

"Commander Yan, doesn't that mean mankind is set for life after winning this throne?" Fang Yi gasped.

"It's a five-year rental, nothing more. It'll pass to the next winner of the Void Cup in five years' time," Yan Long explained.

"Oh? In that case, we'll just have to train the disciples of the Zenith Dojo well and have them win the next Void Cup!" Because of Zhang Lie's overwhelming strength, Fang Yi didn't have a sense of just how difficult his claim would be to realize.

"If you really can do so, I'll thank you on behalf of all the citizens of China." If Fang Yi were able to train such excellent students, then so much the better.

Yan Long then turned to Zhang Lie. "Zhang Lie, thank you. The effects of the Void Throne will surely cultivate a generation of geniuses on Earth—and this is all thanks to you, you and the members of Team Zenith! On behalf of all China, I thank you for what you've accomplished."

Beside him, Su Feng nodded formally.

Flustered, Zhang Lie waved his hands, not intending to claim full credit for the victory. In fact, the primary reason he had wanted to participate in the Void Cup was to cure his sister's paralysis. He had heard of the Void Throne, and he knew it was an extremely potent artifact, but not precisely what it did. After all, in his past life, he had certainly never qualified for the Void Cup.

So this was why the four prime races placed so much attention on a first-realm tournament—it was all for the throne!

A moment later, he asked, "What other prizes are awarded to the winner? Surely there must be more than the throne itself?"

Yan Long nodded. "Of course. As the champion of the Void Cup, you can choose three items—growth-type soulshards or rare herbs from the third realm and up—in the world federation's treasury."

Zhang Lie's lips quirked up in a smile. If he remembered correctly, the fruit of life was indeed a third-realm spiritual treasure.

"Commander Yan, do you know if I'll be able to acquire a fruit of life?"

"Ah, yes—I almost forgot about your sister! Don't worry, the fruit of life is an additional reward handed to each champion of the Void Cup, with the ability to restore nerve damage and to expand one's soulspace."

Only then did Zhang Lie feel as though a weight had been relieved from his chest.

Once he returned, his sister would be cured. It had taken him eighteen long years and two lives to fulfill his promise to his sister, to let her stand on her own without any external assistance whatsoever.

Zhang Lie turned to the east. Thinking about how his sister had been forced to suffer for so long, his eyes couldn't help but turn misty.

Chapter 265: The Fruit of Life

To give Zhang Lie a moment to himself, Fang Yi turned to Yan Long and asked, "Commander Yan, how about the rewards for the rest of us? Surely we'll get something good too?"

"Of course! As the second-place winner, you'll get just a few rewards less than Zhang Lie. Moreover, your ranking in the Void Cup will be of more worth than you imagine when you ascend through the realms of the dimensional world. You'll face more challenges, of course, but with your strength, there's nothing to fear. To be honest, I still feel as though I'm in a dream. All of you represent the pride of China, of Earth, of all mankind. You deserve whatever accolades we can heap on you!" Yan Long affirmed again.

The hunters smiled at what they had accomplished.

While they talked, their hotel had filled to the brim with all sorts of crazed fans, and if not for the fact that guards had been dispatched to maintain order around the hotel, it would be in a complete mess.

The humans had simply caused far too large a commotion by monopolizing the top three spots in the Void Cup. No one could deny that the humans were strong; their placement in the Void Cup spoke volumes.

The humans had beaten the winged, the nightdemons, the aquatic, and even the starbeasts. They were indubitably the strongest race represented in this iteration of the Void Cup, and they deserved the respect of the other races of the Milky Way.

Those races who hadn't sent representatives to the humans before tried to establish a relationship with them, whereas those that had already done so tried to strengthen it. This behavior extended even to those races who were known to be on friendly terms with the humans, such as the blood demons, night spirits, and even nightdemons.

Everyone was trying to learn more about Zhang Lie and Team Zenith.

Faced with such a crowd of people, Zhang Lie and the others didn't dare brave the throngs outside. They had a simple meal within the hotel as they waited for the awards ceremony in the afternoon.

The awards ceremony happened in the main arena, which had been repurposed for the event. A black pyramid appeared at the very center of the arena, composed of a hundred seats. These had been specially prepared for the top hundred competitors of the Void Cup.

Names appeared on the holographic screen. Whenever a name scrolled past the screen, the corresponding hunter would step forward and take the corresponding seat.

The crowd could be broadly divided into two categories: those envious of the competitors on stage, and those expectant, raring to compete in their own right. Those hunters who were advancing to the second realm, who no longer had a chance to participate, looked on enviously at their friends or enemies on stage, while those of the younger generation couldn't wait to take on the Void Cup themselves.

The somber procession gave them an objective and the motivation to take on that objective.

They eagerly awaited the day that they too could participate in such a competition, taking one of those hundred seats on stage. Their eyes shone as they watched Zhang Lie, the champion of the Void Cup and last to be introduced, take his seat at the front of the procession.

Zhang Lie, twenty years old, a human, whose parents had vanished during his childhood, leaving him alone with his paralyzed sister. He, who was once the king of the dumps in the Blacksteel settlement, had now become the champion of the Void Cup!

One by one, the victors were sent into the world federation's treasury to procure their rewards.

Zhang Lie lowered his head and began to analyze the Void Throne, on which he was seated. The black mineral out of which the Void Throne had been constructed gave off a soft, dark glow. When light shone on it, it shone with luster.

The moment Zhang Lie sat on it, he was shocked by the changes to his body. Ten times the accumulation, ten times the circulation... it was an unbelievable experience. Given the complexity of Zhang Lie's [Ninecarp Transformation], it was rather difficult to convert accumulate genetic energy and to circulate it throughout his body.

Under usual circumstances, it would take him an hour of concentration to perform a single cycle, and if he were distracted, it would take him even longer. With the Void Throne, however, he had accomplished it within no more than a minute. In fact, given the throne, Zhang Lie thought that he might even be able to evolve [Ninecarp Transformation] and unlock its fourth form relatively quickly.

Furthermore, Zhang Lie discovered that the throne also seemed to have some calming effect that would improve his mental acuity and allow him to focus on his cultivation. These two boons alone made the Void Throne a wondrous treasure—and the first was even a domain effect!

In addition, despite the fact that the throne was sculpted from a mineral, it was surprisingly comfortable. Zhang Lie briefly entertained the notion of spending another five years in the first realm of the dimensional world to enter the next iteration of the Void Cup as well, but he rejected the idea near-instantly. He didn't have the time to waste.

Compared to the second realm, the first realm was far less imposing and impressive. The second realm was even larger than the first, and filled with more riches and treasures. He had developed his abilities to just about the greatest extent possible in the first realm, and there was no reason to remain there any longer. By the time those five years on the Void Throne were up, he was certain he could devise one of his own.

It was almost time for him and the other top competitors to claim their prizes. Zhang Lie glanced up to see Sun Xiaowu, in eighteenth place, return to his seat happily with his prize. After another twenty minutes or so, Xing Bai, Sun Mengmeng, Fang Yi, went to claim their respective prizes.

The better the competitors' placement, the longer they spent in the treasury. Xing Bai had spent about five minutes inside, as did Sun Mengmeng and Fang Yi. They all came out with a satisfied expression on their faces.

Finally, it was Zhang Lie's turn. He entered a storehouse filled with miraculous treasures, ones that made even his eyes bulge.

"Honored Champion of the Void Cup, welcome to the world federation's peak-grade treasury. As the champion, you are eligible to choose up to six soulshards, spiritual herbs, or other treasures within."

His first objective was, naturally, to find a fruit of life for his sister. However, despite searching the entire treasury up and down, he couldn't find a single such fruit. Was it not in the list of prizes for the Void Cup that year? Surely not.

Chapter 266: A Celebratory Banquet

How could there be no fruits of life here? Wasn't this the peak-grade treasury? Flustered, he shouted at the artificial intelligence overseeing the treasury.

"Honored Champion of the Void Cup, the fruit of life isn't considered a peak-grade treasure, and cannot be found in this treasury. The fruit of life is an additional reward given to the top three participants in the Void Cup. Unless you wish to receive an additional fruit, you will not need to specifically request more."

Zhang Lie sighed in relief. This was a little different from what Yan Long had mentioned, but not by much.

"Would you be able to hand me my fruit of life immediately?" That said, Zhang Lie couldn't truly relax before he had the fruit in his hands.

"As you wish, Honored Champion."

Within ten seconds, a robot whirled into the treasury with an orange-colored fruit in his hands.

The most pressing matter resolved, Zhang Lie turned back to the items within the treasury. Among these items were rare treasures that Zhang Lie had only heard of but had never before seen. It took him half an hour to go through the items one by one, and he finally settled on six spiritual herbs.

After all, at this point in time, Zhang Lie was essentially the only pillmaster in the world, and the potency that he could obtain from these herbs was worth far more than any other treasure. Indeed, before the awards ceremony, he had handed a list of rare herbs to the other hunters of Team Zenith, requesting that they prioritize anything on the list if possible. Considering the fact that their performance had been in large part due to the resources that he had shared with them, the members of Team Zenith agreed immediately.

After finalizing his selection, Zhang Lie returned to the arena as the awards ceremony was drawing to a close. After the ceremony, Zhang Lie and the others were instantly surrounded by rabid fans. Even the presence of the Ural guards wasn't sufficient to deter them. They all knew that the competition had ended, and that this would be their final chance to get close to Zhang Lie.

It took Zhang Lie and the other hunters three whole hours to make it out, and that only with the help of the Ural guards.

"I can't believe it—they've torn my clothes to shreds!" Sun Xiaowu, who had been standing by the outskirts of the party, exclaimed in shock.

"They're even more difficult to deal with than our competitors in the Void Cup..." Fang Yi murmured.

"Of course—after all, we can strike at our opponents, but certainly not the fans. But of all of us, the captain surely had it the worst—didn't you see how many people were surrounding him?"

"If nothing else, at least we're back at the hotel now. I really do pity Commanders Yan Long and Su Feng, who are still out there in the crowd," Zhang Lie replied. "As for the rest of you, you need to get used to this sort of situation. If this is what it's like here on Ural, can you imagine what it would be like back on Earth?"

The hunters' eyes bulged. They knew that Zhang Lie was right, but for them to get used to such fanatical crowds wasn't something that could be done easily in the short term.

Luckily, they didn't have to worry about anything here at the Nike Hotel. Indeed, because of the fact that the humans were staying here, the Nike Hotel had grown immensely in popularity, and Ural guards had been specifically requisitioned to patrol the area. No regular fan would be able to bother Zhang Lie and the others at all.

What they would need to worry about was the upcoming banquet before their departure. After all, Zhang Lie and the humans had made a few allies during the tournament, including the blood demons and the night spirits. They were also on good terms with the starbeasts, aquatic, and the nightdemons.

This might well be the last time they saw each other in person for quite a while, so the other races would likely bring up their imminent cooperation to develop limit fragments as well.

"Mengmeng, have the hotel start preparing a banquet. Everyone else, help greet the young leaders and representatives from each race that shows up!"

In principle, Yan Long and Su Feng should have been responsible for organizing this banquet, but they would likely be trapped out in the crowd for some time. Indeed, Zhang Lie's preparations were prescient, because Yan Long and Su Feng only made it back to the hotel in the evening.

By then, Xing Bai of the starbeasts, Lianna of the aquatic, and so on had already begun messaging Zhang Lie about a potential banquet before his departure. Zhang Lie cordially invited them to the largest ballroom the Nike Hotel was able to provide.

Moments later, however, Zhang Lie, the members of Team Zenith, and even Yan Long and Su Feng began receiving messages from the other races of the Milky Way, hoping to secure an invitation to this banquet.

It was obvious to everyone that this would be a celebration for Zhang Lie, as well as a farewell. In other words, for those races that had yet to secure Zhang Lie's cooperation, this was their last chance to meet with him before his departure.

The Nike Hotel was large, but not impossibly so; not all the representatives of each race would be able to obtain an invitation. In the end, Zhang Lie invited all the representatives of the hundred strongest races, and sent word to all others who had requested an invitation that he would eventually expand his research team and draw them into the fold.

At the grand ballroom of the Nike Hotel, the young leaders of the four prime races, along with those of the hundred strongest races in the galaxy, gathered with their retinues, in a show of power and prestige surprisingly comparable to that of the Void Cup's awards ceremony.

Zhang Lie, the members of Team Zenith, Yan Long, and Su Feng were all surrounded by a crowd of people.

A few musicians were playing classical music in the background, but other than that, the crowd was surprisingly silent.

Zhang Lie strode toward the center of the ballroom. "Everyone, thank you for joining me for a banquet today despite your busy schedules. Owing to our success in the Void Cup, we've prepared this banquet to thank all of you for your support and goodwill.

Everyone applauded.

After a short speech, Zhang Lie announced the start of the banquet, and the guests began to mingle with each other, enjoying the delicacies and appetizers that were being served.

The first to toast Zhang Lie was Hong Yu of the winged. She had no choice but to make such a public gesture; as the new young leader of the winged, her burdens were particularly weighty.

The relationship between the winged and the humans had been rather fraught because of what had happened with Phoenix and the white-winged emperor, but the winged certainly couldn't give up on these limit fragments. As a result, Hong Yu had to repair their damaged relationship at any cost.

"Mr. Zhang, I'd like to congratulate you once more for your magnificent performance during this Void Cup. I'd also like to take the opportunity to apologize once more on behalf of the tensions that have arisen between your team and the winged because of several of our kin.

"Mr. Zhang, our kinsmen's actions aren't representative of the winged at large, and I fervently hope you won't hold it against us. Allow me to give you a toast!"

Hong Yu inclined her head and drained her glass of wine.

"Don't worry about it, Miss Hong Yu. I don't intend on holding the winged accountable, so there's no need to probe my attitude once and again. Once I'm prepared to work together with your race regarding my limit fragment research, I'll let you know," Zhang Lie responded directly.

Chapter 267: Returning to Earth

With Zhang Lie's promise in hand, Hong Yu nodded and graciously moved aside, allowing the next guest to take her place.

"Mr. Zhang, congratulations on becoming the champion of the Void Cup. You've completely toppled my past understanding of the human race!" Lianna of the aquatic stepped forward.

"You honor me, Princess Lianna. It was merely a matter of luck."

After a moment of casual conversation, Lianna turned to the main topic at hand. "Am I correct in guessing that you'll be leaving tomorrow? I'd like to learn more about how we should be cooperating with regards to our limit fragment research."

Zhang Lie paused for a moment. "Before we leave tomorrow, send three promising teenagers, not past the age of eighteen, to come back to Earth with me."

"Ah, is three enough? I can prepare more of them for you, if you'd like," Lianna assured him.

"No, it's a matter of quality, not quantity. Three would be enough, and I don't have the resources to take care of more."

Indeed, the humans were traveling light, and taking three members of the aquatic with them was the most they could handle. After all, they weren't the only ones who would be sending promising test subjects his way: the night spirits, starbeasts, and nightdemons would likely be doing the same.

There would be twelve of these teenagers running around in all, and the trip back to Earth wasn't a short one. Thus, three was Zhang Lie's firm limit.

Lianna inclined her head, promising that she would have them sent to the Nike Hotel by that night.

After Lianna came the nightdemons' Pu Kui and the night spirits' Ye Mo. Just like with Lianna, they were both informed to send three of their most promising teens to Earth with Zhang Lie. As for subsequent arrangements, Zhang Lie promised that he would keep in contact with the various races via intergalactic videoconference.

The remaining races also stepped forward to toast Zhang Lie. Among them was Yao Yue, who was slated for the second batch of races to join Zhang Lie's research program. After some discussion, they settled on a time at which she would send her race's most promising representatives to Earth.

While the other races weren't necessarily able to secure a spot for themselves for their limit fragment research, they at least made their faces and identities known to Zhang Lie.

This would clearly be an ongoing collaboration between the humans and the races of the galaxy, so just meeting Zhang Lie would be a good start to developing a relationship with the humans and acquiring such an opportunity.

The banquet lasted deep into the night. By the time it was over, it was already nearing midnight. Even Yan Long and Su Feng were exhausted, let alone Zhang Lie and the others. There were simply too many guests present, and they had had to greet and say goodbye to far too many of them.

However, the end of the banquet wasn't the end of their troubles—by that time, the nightdemons, night spirits, aquatic, and starbeasts had already sent three representatives each to Team Zenith's suites. The oldest among them was only fourteen years old, and they had an average age of twelve.

The humanoids were better off, but the young cubs of the starbeasts looked no different than small kittens or pups from Earth. The only difference was that they could speak, and they were clearly far more intelligent than wild beasts.

Team Zenith's suites devolved into pandemonium. This was the first time these children had met their idol in person, as well as been in contact with so many humans and each other. Alternating between fear and excitement, they caused a gigantic ruckus.

Fortunately, they were more or less afraid of Zhang Lie, and he ultimately enticed and wheedled them into going to bed in the rooms that were arranged for them.

The next morning, when Zhang Lie found himself woken up by frenzied, youthful giggling, he wished he could return these 'goods' to their various representatives. He wasn't even twice their age! Who would want to take care of these troublesome children?

At the very least, he would only have to be around them for three more days. After that, they would all be back at the Zenith Dojo, and he could leave them in Zhang Hong's care. Once they learned to be obedient, they would move on to the testing required for the limit fragment research. The research would be done on their bodies, after all, so Zhang Lie had to secure their cooperation first.

By then, Yan Long and Su Feng had finished their preparations. Once everyone else woke up and finished packing, they took the first step on their three-day trek back to Earth.

"Welcome home!"

"Welcome home, our heroes—Zhang Lie, Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, Sun Xiaowu, Li Feng, Yang Ze, Zhou Ying!"

"Welcome home, Commanders Yan Long and Su Feng!"

When the party arrived back in the Chinese capital's main teleportation array, well-rehearsed shouts rang throughout the capital, causing everyone to stir. Zhang Lie, champion of the Void Throne, hero of the humans of Earth, the Dragonwolf of China, had finally returned!

A series of fireworks was launched into the air, dyeing it in shades of red and green.

Outside the teleportation array, the soldiers that had been waiting there for them quickly formed a cordon to protect them. There were specially prepared hovercars that would escort Zhang Lie and the others to China's national assembly hall, where they met the Chinese president and the representatives of each country that warmly thanked the hunters of Team Zenith for their efforts during the tournament.

Zhang Lie and the others were, once again, commended for their actions. This time, every member of Team Zenith was heralded as a dragonsoul warrior, whereas Zhang Lie himself was bequeathed with the title of dragonlord and given its corresponding medal, immediately elevating his status in the military above even Yan Long.

By the time the ceremonial proceedings were over, it was already evening. On Zhang Lie's insistence, the officials finally relented and allowed them to return to Ning, which was already in an uproar over Zhang Lie's return.

After all, the moment he had been spotted in the capital, the news had spread to Ning. The interior of the Zenith Dojo, along with the streets all surrounding it, and even several rooftops, were packed with people.

His apprentices and disciples lay in wait in the dojo. Their dojo leader's impending return excited them more than anyone else. They stood straight at attention, facing the teleportation array, vibrating with nerves.

Zhang Hong, Zhang Hanxiang, Jun Jiuxiao, and Ye Xianchen were waiting right outside the array to receive the hunters of Team Zenith.

The accolades that Zhang Lie had won were so incredible that Zhang Hong couldn't imagine how much the Zenith Dojo would grow as a result. The dojo leader, along with his trusted teammates, had returned victorious, monopolizing the top three places in the Void Cup!

Such an accomplishment would certainly propel the Zenith Dojo beyond the reach of any other dojo on Earth, or even the Solar System at large. Given all of this, it was imperative that they prepare to receive their dojo leader formally.

That evening, as Zhang Hong was wondering whether they would have to stand at attention the entire night, the teleportation array flashed with white light, and Zhang Lie appeared with Commander Su Feng and the rest of Team Zenith.

"Brother!"

"Dojo Leader!"

"Congratulations on your triumph, Dojo Leader!"

"Congratulations on your triumph, Dojo Leader!"

Cheers and shouts rang out across the dojo, spreading throughout all of Ning.

Chapter 268: The Imminent Disaster

The moment Zhang Lie stepped down from the array, he pushed all the children from the alien races in Zhang Hong's direction. He strode around the dojo to raise the disciples' spirits, then quickly pulled Zhang Hanxiang into a training chamber.

They were there for two whole days.

He had had to leave momentarily to take care of the Void Throne, which the hosts of the Void Cup had just sent over, but had otherwise remained in the training chamber with his sister in an attempt to restore her paralyzed legs.

In his past life, Zhang Lie had carefully inspected Zhang Hanxiang's legs before. The problem wasn't with her legs, but rather with a disconnect related to her central nervous system, so that had to be Zhang Lie's target.

This was why he had had to acquire the fruit of life at all costs, because this miraculous fruit would have the ability to restore function to his sister's legs. What he had to do now was to concoct a potion with the fruit of life, have his sister ingest it, and to guide the medicinal energy in the potion to her legs by directing it with his genetic energy.

This was a long and tedious process, but as Zhang Hanxiang's brother, Zhang Lie couldn't help feeling a sense of satisfaction and joy. After all, what was a few days of hard work compared to his sister's ability to walk?

In the afternoon of the second day, as he glanced at the golden potion in his hands, Zhang Lie shouted in triumph, "I've succeeded, Hanxiang, I've succeeded!"

Zhang Hanxiang's eyes slowly widened as she glanced at the potion. "Brother, does that mean that I'll really be able to stand on my own two feet?"

She clutched her wheelchair, wracked with a sudden bout of nerves. After eighteen years of being bound to a wheelchair, would she finally be able to stand?

As Zhang Lie glanced at her trembling body, he handed her the potion. "Drink this. I'll need to probe your body with my genetic energy to direct the potion's effects, but if everything works, you should be able to walk on your own two feet."

"I-In that case, brother, pl-please begin!"

"Get ready." Zhang Lie helped transfer her to a stool, then placed his hands on her back.

Zhang Hanxiang inclined her head and swallowed the potion in a single gulp.

Zhang Lie began kneading her back, sensing the tendrils of energy from the potion, guiding them toward her neck and spine. Though this was the first time Zhang Lie had ever taken part in such a procedure, everything went smoothly. Zhang Lie hardly had to do anything beyond the initial prompting before the medicinal effects of the potion took hold.

From where he stood behind her, he saw one of Zhang Hanxiang's legs begin to tremble. The motion was so weak that it was barely perceptible, but it had happened.

For the first time in eighteen years, Zhang Hanxiang was able to sense her legs. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she suddenly began to cry.

Zhang Lie turned to her front and hugged her, patting her back and telling her that everything would be fine.

It took Zhang Hanxiang half an hour before she could calm down from the burst of emotion she had displayed. In fits and starts, her legs had regained sensation, and she slowly tried to stand up.

Almost immediately, she stumbled, but Zhang Lie caught her before she could fall.

As he helped her back into her wheelchair, however, Zhang Hanxiang smiled. She was certain that it was only a matter of time before she would be able to walk on her own, to free herself of the wheelchair that had been her constant companion for her entire life.

"Brother, thank you!" She didn't know just how rare this fruit of life was, but she did know that, if she were alone, it would have been near-impossible for her to find a way to free herself of her paralysis.

Hearing her words, however, Zhang Lie frowned. "What's there to thank? I'm your brother!"

"That's why I'm only saying it once, Brother—thank you!" Her eyes glistened with tears as she beheld her brother anew.

Zhang Lie sighed. "We'd better prepare a training regimen for you to get used to your legs. In a few days' time, I think we'll even be able to take a walk together."

"Yes, Brother!"

Over the next week, Zhang Lie spent whatever time he could spare with Zhang Hanxiang, helping her with all sorts of exercises and brewing tonics and potions for her, until she really was able to walk unaided. At present, the two of them were slowly walking around the inner courtyard of the Zenith Dojo.

"Brother, how am I doing? It's all thanks to you!" Her legs were visibly trembling from the effort, and she still wasn't able to walk particularly quickly, but even that amount of recovery in the span of a week was nothing short of miraculous.

Zhang Lie smiled. "You're doing very well, Hanxiang."

She turned around to face him. "In that case, Brother, do you think I'd be able to become a hunter, just like you?"

"Ah, well, there's no rush. Once you've fully recovered, and once we've drilled some fundamentals into you, I'll certainly let you enter the dimensional world for yourself."

For some reason, Zhang Hanxiang seemed to be particularly devoted to becoming a hunter after she learned that she would be able to walk again, but in truth, Zhang Lie didn't want to let her take such a risk.

The reason that Zhang Hanxiang wanted to enter the dimensional world as quickly as she could was to grow strong, strong enough to help her brother, but she had no clue how massive the difference in strength between her and her brother was.

Furthermore, as far as Zhang Lie was aware, now that the Void Cup was over, there was a disaster-grade lifeform slated to make an appearance in the first realm of the dimensional world, and it would be the most dangerous period for new hunters.

"Hanxiang, trust me when I say that now's not the time. I promise you, I'll allow you to head in the moment I know it's safe, but before then, I expect you to listen to me. Do you understand?"

Zhang Hanxiang sighed but nodded. "I'll wait patiently, Brother."

Zhang Lie didn't remember when exactly the incident had occurred, only that it had happened soon after the end of the Void Cup. It was for that reason that, even after becoming the champion of the Void Cup, Zhang Lie still hadn't headed into the second realm.

That disaster-grade lifeform was to be Zhang Lie's final target in the first realm. It was a lifeform that had yet to be discovered to date. As a disaster-grade lifeform, it was even stronger than the peak-grade moonlight wyrm that Zhang Lie had faced.

In fact, the very designation of "disaster-grade" came from the fact that it had been a disaster for all the hunters of the first realm, none of whom were able to deal any damage to such a lifeform. Only attacks imbued with spiritual energy of greater potency than those lifeforms possessed would even be able to damage them.

Zhang Lie hadn't mentioned the existence of a disaster-grade lifeform to the members of Team Zenith, because he knew that they still wouldn't be strong enough to handle such a foe. Although he had slated the disaster-grade lifeform as his own target, he had no idea whether he would actually be able to do so. If not for the fact that he knew that this disaster-grade lifeform would arrive in the first realm heavily wounded, he would hardly have dared to try.

The only reason Zhang Lie thought himself able to face such a creature was because it would be terribly wounded, and it would have its powers suppressed by the will of the world. It was a significant risk, but also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, one that Zhang Lie had no intention to give up.

If he really were able to take down the disaster-grade lifeform, then Zhang Lie's achievements and number of gene fragments as a first-realm hunter would be unparalleled by any hunter, past or future, to come.

Chapter 269: Monitoring the Realm

With Zhang Hanxiang's affairs resolved, it was time for him to look over his apprentices' progress. At the same time, he would be able to warn them to avoid the first realm of the dimensional world for the near future.

The disaster-grade lifeform had caused massive damage all around where it spawned, and the Blacksteel Settlement and its surroundings had been part of the danger zone.

After stepping outside of the chamber, Zhang Lie immediately went to find Zhang Hong to request that she summon his two apprentices, which Jun Jiuxiao and Ye Xianchen had been waiting for.

"Master!" Their faces were flushed red with agitation.

As their master obtained more and more accolades, their status continued to rise without their having done anything at all. They used to be the apprentices to the Dragonwolf Zhang Lie; now, they were the apprentices to the Champion of the Void Cup! They weren't the only two who felt this way; the disciples, instructors, and staff all over the dojo would likewise have to adapt to this change.

"Neither of you have stopped training while I've been gone, have you?"

"Master, given your display of strength throughout the Void Cup, how could we slow down? We've both become more accustomed to our techniques, but because we haven't had a chance to obtain any gene fragments, we can't get much stronger beyond that," Jun Jiuxiao responded, his voice brimming with anticipation with his last sentence.

Based on the look in his eyes, if Zhang Lie were to allow him to do so, he would immediately rush into the dimensional world and begin acquiring gene fragments to strengthen himself. Beside him, Ye Xianchen inclined her head in agreement.

Zhang Lie didn't doubt his two apprentices' ability— that had been made clear during the trial he had set for them. However, with the disaster-grade lifeform about to make an appearance, it would be far too dangerous for them to start their journey as hunters.

"I understand your strength, but the first realm of the dimensional world is about to face a tribulation. Without my express command, you are not to enter the dimensional world. Do you understand?"

The two apprentices seemed confused, particularly Ye Xianchen. "But, Master, didn't you say that we would be able to do so once you returned from the Void Cup?"

"I failed to account for this upcoming issue. This isn't something either of you, or even the majority of the lifeforms in the first realm, would be able to survive."

"Yes, Master!"

Zhang Lie had made his will clear, and neither of his apprentices would oppose him.

"Now, why don't you show me how your framework and techniques have progressed to this point?"

Zhang Lie noted with satisfaction that neither of his apprentices had slacked off, and they had developed rather unique modifications to their respective techniques, so Zhang Lie felt much more relaxed about what he was going to do next.

After pointing out a few errors, he worked out a training regimen for both of them. He really was quite impressed with their drive and expertise, and he intended to assign them as companions and bodyguards for his sister, Zhang Hanxiang, within the first realm.

Next would be the supervision of all the disciples currently training in the Zenith Dojo. He was the dojo leader of the Zenith Dojo, after all, and there were responsibilities he couldn't avoid. He had won the Void Throne, the insignia of the champion that the strongest members of his generation sought for. Any hunter would want to receive his recognition, let alone his disciples.

That entire morning, a serious atmosphere seemed to descend on the Zenith Dojo as Zhang Lie made the rounds for his inspection. He was very pleased with what he found. Perhaps because of his existence, or because of the environment fostered in the dojo, the disciples had progressed far more than he had expected, and he commended Zhang Hong, Lin Xiu, and the instructors like Wang Li for their efforts.

Zhang Lie placed particular emphasis on Zhang Hong; whenever he left, tasks that he would otherwise be responsible for had fallen to her. Although she knew that Zhang Lie wouldn't blame her if she wasn't able to handle everything satisfactorily, she still tried her best, and she had even roped Lin Xiu into helping her as well.

"Everyone, you've all done well, and the results of your hard work are evident. I'm very pleased with your efforts, and I hope you'll keep up your training. The Void Throne will be present in the Zenith Dojo for the next five years, and this will surely be the golden period of growth for the Zenith Dojo. I hope you can all take this opportunity to grow strong, so strong that you can keep the Void Throne right here in the next iteration of the Void Cup in five years' time. Do you all understand?"

"Yes, Dojo Leader!"

Zhang Lie's lips quirked up into a smile. He beckoned for the members of Team Zenith to enter the dimensional world with him.

When Zhang Lie and the others arrived in the Blacksteel Settlement, their sudden appearance caused a big fuss—by then, they were so well-known within the first realm that this was an inevitable occurrence.

Faced with a frenzy of rabid fans, the hunters had to rush into a VIP suite in the Blacksteel Hotel.

"Captain, under these circumstances, how are we supposed to get from place to place?" Sun Xiaowu complained.

Everyone else was starting to feel the negative effects of their newfound popularity as well.

On the other hand, Fang Yi seemed more concerned about another matter entirely. "Captain, didn't you tell us not to enter the dimensional world in the near future? Why are we here now?"

Everyone jerked in surprise—Zhang Lie had indeed mentioned that!

Zhang Lie smiled. "I think there's still a bit of time left, so I'm hoping you'll all be able to help me keep surveillance on a few areas and help me collect a few items."

Surveillance? Collection? For what purpose?

"Captain, is something about to happen? Do you know of another peak-grade lifeform you're preparing to kill?" Sun Mengmeng suddenly asked, her eyes shining.

Glancing at everyone's excited gazes, Zhang Lie laughed. "This is the first realm! Do you think peak-grade lifeforms pop up all that frequently? Honestly, we were lucky enough just to find that moonlight wyrm—I was shocked that there was even one peak-grade lifeform in the entirety of the first realm, let alone more. The task that I'm assigning all of you is to keep an eye out on certain areas for latent threats."

"Latent threats? With our strength, what's there to worry about?" Sun Mengmeng pressed.

"I'll inform you in due time. I'm going to be providing all of you with a map with a few target locations, and I'd like all of you to head to these locations and keep an eye out on your surroundings. Once you notice something amiss, do not try to investigate. Immediately return to the real world and inform me of what you found. Do you understand?"

Zhang Lie's sudden seriousness caused everyone to nod their heads at once. "We understand, Captain!"

It was clear from Zhang Lie's mannerisms that they would be facing something serious indeed, but if Zhang Lie didn't want them to investigate, he surely had his own reasons as to why.

"What about the things that you'd like us to collect?" Sun Mengmeng continued.

"I'm interested in a few herbs and implements that have to deal with blood—with the connections that you all developed while searching for herbs in the past, reach out and try to procure what's on this list of items. Here's the list, and here's the map. Decide how you want to allocate your resources and head to each location immediately."

Moments later, deep in the night, there was no one left in the VIP suite except an open window and a billowing curtain.

Chapter 270: Waiting at the Lake

In the next two weeks, however, nothing of note seemed to occur within the regions that Zhang Lie had highlighted, and the hunters of Team Zenith couldn't help but suspect that this was all just a test of patience from Zhang Lie's perspective.

Once again, they gathered at the VIP suite of the Blacksteel Hotel. Zhang Lie had been waiting there for all of them; Fang Yi, Sun Mengmeng, Sun Xiaowu, Yang Ze, and Li Feng had appeared in turn.

Only Zhou Ying remained absent, even long after the scheduled meeting time.

"What's going on? Which of you is closest to the region Zhou Ying was in? Has anyone heard anything from her?" Zhang Lie was visibly anxious.

Everyone shook their heads.

"Captain, the regions you assigned to us were so large that it takes quite a while to check each one exhaustively. Could Zhou Ying have forgotten the time?" Sun Xiaowu proposed.

"Better safe than sorry. She was in charge of regions C4 through D8, wasn't she? I'll go have a look—stay here and see if she tries to contact any of you!" Zhang Lie dashed out of the window.

By the time Zhang Lie found Zhou Ying, she was already on her way back to the hotel. The two of them noticed each other around a hundred and twenty kilometers to the north of the Blacksteel settlement, and they recognized each other's familiar genetic fluctuations almost immediately.

"Zhou Ying!"

"Captain!"

"What's going on? Why are you only returning now? Did something happen in the region you were responsible for?"

"I'm not certain, Captain. I keep feeling as though something's amiss, but I can't find anything specific upon careful investigation," Zhou Ying replied.

"Show me what's going on."

"Yes, Captain!"

Regions C4 through D8 were a whole three hundred kilometers away from the Blacksteel settlement. As far as Zhang Lie could recall, there was a small settlement, the Galewind settlement, in that region. Zhou Ying had spent much of her time there, occasionally venturing out into the outskirts of the settlement and nearby regions to check for any disturbances.

Despite pushing his senses to their extremes, just like Zhou Ying, Zhang Lie was unable to sense anything amiss. He began a careful investigation with Zhou Ying, but they were again stymied. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

"Zhou Ying, what exactly did you find unusual? Could you simply be overthinking things?" Zhang Lie asked.

"Captain, give me a moment. Let me try with my genetic energy—could you help give me a boost?"

It took them around half an hour before Zhou Ying suddenly called out, "Captain, I found it! It's the bubbles in the river in region C6—there are significantly more bubbles in the water than before, I'm certain of it!"

"More bubbles? Do you know where the source of this river is—is it the Galewind Lake?" Zhang Lie hurriedly asked.

"I believe so, Captain. Is something the matter?" Given Zhang Lie's reaction, it seemed as though this was an event of some importance, though Zhou Ying couldn't understand how.

Zhang Lie had no time to explain anything to her. "Zhou Ying, return to the Galewind settlement immediately. Get everyone to evacuate as quickly as possible, then return to the real world and warn all the hunters in the first realm to return to the real world. Finally, inform Commander Su Feng to

spread the word to all Chinese hunters and even hunters worldwide: for the moment, do not enter the first realm. A disaster is on its way!"

Zhou Ying's eyes widened. She still didn't know what was going on—how could a few bubbles herald such an occurrence?!

"Captain, I—"

"Enough! I don't have time to explain this to you. At the very least, get everyone from the Zenith Dojo out and spread the warning far and wide. Whether or not they listen, we've done our part.

It would take him far too long to explain just how extreme a disaster-grade lifeform's strength was.

Zhou Ying rushed off into the distance, whereas Zhang Lie himself followed the river up toward the Galewind Lake. By the time he arrived there, he could see no sign and sense no trace of the disaster-grade lifeform, but he was certain that it would appear in the first realm from within the lake, given the unusual bubbles that were rising up from its depths. This was a clear sign that space was growing thin around the region.

Perhaps the disaster-grade lifeform was, at this very moment, fighting for its life in a higher realm. Given the reports he recalled from his past life, the disaster-grade lifeform had appeared in the dimensional world bearing serious injuries, as though it had previously been part of a fight.

Zhang Lie had no interest in the sort of being that would be able to wound a disaster-grade lifeform to this extent; at the very least, he was certain he had no ability to survive an encounter with such a creature. He was simply hoping to take advantage of the disaster-grade lifeform's heavily wounded and weakened appearance to see if he could kill it and reap the benefits for doing so.

His next step was therefore to set up traps for this lifeform all around the battlefield. As a disaster-grade lifeform, it would be immune to most physical attacks, and even spiritual attacks would need to exceed a certain threshold to be able to damage it.

Even Zhang Lie would be hard-pressed to break past its defenses, but he had come prepared with a series of potions that would be particularly useful in this fight.

With the blood-attuned reagents he had tasked the members of Team Zenith to find, he had concocted a few potions specifically against this disaster-grade lifeform, which would crystallize in its body and restrict the rate at which it could gather genetic energy.

Zhang Lie blocked off the outlet to the lake, then began pouring all his potions into the Galewind Lake, dyeing it a bloody red.